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**Virtual Hākari:  
Sharing Māori Culinary Traditions in Online Communities**

A thesis  
submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
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**Charlotte Muru-Lanning**



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## **Abstract**

For Māori, kai is a vital expression of identity, community, place and whakapapa. Traditionally, knowledge about kai is transmitted through customary community groupings and culturally embedded practices. However, with the rise of digital platforms, new spaces have emerged for Māori to gather and to share kai in virtual forms.

This thesis observes how two Facebook groups – Kai Maori and KAI Basket NZ – operate as contemporary spaces for the transmission of Māori culinary knowledge and cultural identity. Kai Māori is considered alongside global studies of culinary traditions and understood through the notion of kai as whakapapa. The thesis addresses two core research questions: 1) How do Facebook groups contribute to an evolving concept of kai Māori? and 2) What kinds of relationships define these online kai communities?

Guided by Māori data sovereignty (MDSov) principles, I observed interactions on both Facebook pages in two phases – one involving selective data collection over a twelve-month period from January to December 2024 the other involving systematic data collection over a four-week period from 10 December 2024 to 10 January 2025. The observation periods yielded 115 and 1293 posts respectively. A covert digital approach of ‘lurking’ was adopted as seeking prior consent may have affected the quality of the data and disrupted group dynamics. Lurking, as a method, sits uneasily alongside MDSov principles, particularly the principle of manaakitanga, requiring free, prior and informed consent. To address this I safeguarded the confidentiality of community members by seeking consent before reproducing content, removing group members’ names and excluding sensitive information. To analyse posts I used Ethnographic Content Analysis which allowed me to conduct a reflexive, iterative analysis of the posts in a way that was sensitive to the context in which the content was created.

These digital observations show that these groups serve as platforms for the transmission and innovation of kai Māori, encompassing edible components as well as the values enmeshed within these culinary traditions. Despite the mediated nature of these exchanges – where food is virtually consumed rather than physically shared, separate from traditional notions of community – these groups nurture meaningful connections among members, including those physically

distant from their whenua. Through recipes, photos, stories, and commentary, the members of Kai Maori and KAI Basket NZ cultivate community identity and belonging via common cultural understandings, sharing of knowledge, a general spirit of sociality – and, importantly, a mutual love of kai.

I conceptualise these online spaces as virtual hākari, where the act of sharing virtual kai becomes an affirmation of identity and a form of cultural resistance. While online sharing may risk distancing kai practices and knowledge from traditional sites of transmission, the data suggests that these platforms may serve as conduits that encourage deeper cultural engagement offline. This thesis highlights the centrality of food in Māori cultural survival, sovereignty and resistance. In these digital spaces, kai Māori is not only celebrated but continually reimaged – reinforcing that to prepare, share and celebrate kai as Māori is to actively participate in the continuity of cultural identity.

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## Glossary

The following list of terms (predominantly in te reo Māori) and their translations are based upon my own knowledge and the vernacular of the Facebook groups central to this study. For accuracy, additional sources such as Te Aka Māori Dictionary, Barlow (1991), and Biggs (1981) have been used.

A wide range of te reo Māori terms for ingredients and dishes appear throughout this thesis, though not all are included within this glossary. While I have endeavoured to describe these within the text, further definitions can be found online in Te Aka Māori Dictionary.

<b>Aotearoa</b>	The North Island, but now used as the Māori name for New Zealand.
<b>Ahikā</b>	Continuous occupation.
<b>Atua</b>	Ancestors, gods, deities.
<b>Boil up</b>	Soup typically made with pork, greens and root vegetables and flour dumplings.
<b>Haka</b>	A general term for several types of ceremonial dance.
<b>Hākari</b>	Feast, community feast.
<b>Hapū</b>	Subtribe, clan.
<b>Hau kāinga</b>	True home, local people of a marae.
<b>Hawaiki</b>	Ancient homelands from which Māori migrated to Aotearoa.
<b>Heke</b>	Migration, emigrant, group of emigrants.
<b>Iwi</b>	Tribe.
<b>Kai</b>	Food, to eat, to devour.
<b>Kai Māori</b>	Māori food.
<b>Kaimoana</b>	Seafood.
<b>Kāinga</b>	Home, settlement.
<b>Kaitiakitanga</b>	Guardianship, stewardship.
<b>Karakia</b>	Prayers, incantations.
<b>Kaupapa</b>	Topic, philosophy, protocol, principles.
<b>Koha</b>	Gift, contribution.
<b>Kōhanga reo</b>	Māori language preschool. Translates to ‘language nest’.
<b>Kōrero</b>	Speech, conversation, talk.
<b>Kōrero tuku iho</b>	Stories of the past.
<b>Koro</b>	Male elder, grandfather.
<b>Kotahitanga</b>	Unity, solidarity.
<b>Kuia</b>	Female elder, grandmother.

<b>Kupu</b>	Word, term.
<b>Kura kaupapa</b>	Māori language immersion school.
<b>Mahinga kai</b>	Species, customs and places associated with traditional food gathering.
<b>Mana</b>	The supernatural force of a person, place or object derived from atua. Also, prestige and authority.
<b>Manaakitanga</b>	Hospitality, generosity, nurturing relationships, reciprocity.
<b>Mana motuhake</b>	Self-determination, independence.
<b>Manuhiri</b>	Guest.
<b>Māori</b>	Indigenous person/ or persons of Aotearoa. Means normal or ordinary.
<b>Māoritanga</b>	Māoriness, Māori ways of life.
<b>Marae</b>	Meeting place, community facilities. A physical symbol of tribal solidarity.
<b>Maramataka</b>	The Māori lunar calendar.
<b>Mātauranga Māori</b>	Māori knowledge.
<b>Mātauranga-ā-iwi/ a-hapū</b>	Knowledge relating to specific iwi or hapū.
<b>Mauri</b>	Life force.
<b>Pākehā</b>	New Zealander of European descent.
<b>Pūrākau</b>	Storytelling/ story.
<b>Rāhui</b>	Temporary ritual prohibition.
<b>Rangatahi</b>	Youth.
<b>Ringawera</b>	Kitchen worker.
<b>Rohe</b>	Tribal area or boundary.
<b>Tangata whenua</b>	Local people, Indigenous people, people of the land.
<b>Tangihanga</b>	Funeral rites, ceremony of mourning.
<b>Tapu</b>	Sacred, restricted.
<b>Taua</b>	War party.
<b>Te ao Māori</b>	The Māori world.
<b>Te reo Māori</b>	The Māori language.
<b>Te taiao</b>	The natural world.
<b>Tino rangatiratanga</b>	Self-determination, sovereignty, control.
<b>Tikanga</b>	Māori customary system of values and practices.
<b>Tūpuna</b>	Ancestors, grandparents.
<b>Wahine/ Wāhine</b>	Woman/ Women.
<b>Waiata</b>	Song.
<b>Waka ama</b>	Outrigger canoe and the associated sport.
<b>Whaikōrero</b>	Oratory tradition, formal speech-making, address.
<b>Whakapapa</b>	Genealogy, including connections to atua, tūpuna, and the natural world.
<b>Whakataukī</b>	Proverbs.
<b>Whānau</b>	Family, extended family. Can be used more loosely in contemporary times.

<b>Whanaunga</b>	Relative, kin.
<b>Whanaungatanga</b>	Relationship, kinship.
<b>Wharekai</b>	Dining hall, usually as part of the marae complex.
<b>Whenua</b>	Land.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

“Food, obviously, is not only for eating”, wrote Filipino food writer Doreen Fernandez in 1988 (p. 46). Though Fernandez was writing within the context of Filipino food and its indigenisation, it could just as easily have been said of the relationship between Māori and food.

For Māori, food is never just for eating – it is about connection, ritual, memory, knowledge and identity (Burgess & Koroi, 2024; Glassey, 2023; Hutchings & Smith, 2025; Leach, 2010; Smith & Hutchings, 2024; Wham et al., 2012). Our ways of eating are deeply enmeshed with culture, cosmology and collective being. The cultivation, cooking and consumption of food is an expression of mātauranga Māori (Glassey, 2023), or systems of knowledge, that are foundational to our<sup>1</sup> worldviews and ways of life as Māori. Food makes our history tangible, even edible. Our gastronomy binds us to our geography. Our fare can be a form of resistance. Through food, we nourish our relationships with the gods, the natural world, ancestors, communities, one another and ourselves. And as this thesis explores, in the digital age, for Māori, food is still not only for eating. It is also for posting.

The internet has expanded the spaces where culture is practised, shared and consumed (Boellstorff, 2008; Carlson & Frazer, 2021b; Goodwin, 2011; Turkle, 1985). Among these digital environments, Facebook has become a particularly lively and accessible place for Māori to gather and share culture in virtual forms, primarily through use of the site’s ‘Groups’ feature (O’Carroll, 2013b, 2013d; Sciascia, 2016; Waitoa et al., 2015). A small but growing number of these groups have formed around a shared interest in posting images, videos and comments about food with a strong focus on Māori identity. In this thesis, this broader phenomenon is referred to as ‘Kai Māori Facebook groups’. Some of these groups have thousands, even hundreds of thousands of members and serve as fascinating sites of cultural expression and sociality.

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<sup>1</sup> As I am speaking somewhat from the inside, as a wahine Māori, I have occasionally used the first person possessive ‘our’ when making reference to broader Māori perspectives within this thesis.

This thesis centres on two of the most active and populated of these groups: Kai Maori and KAI Basket NZ. A scroll through each of these two Facebook groups results in rich feasts of photos and videos, accompanied by informal conversations. A kaleidoscopic collection of kina, sponge cakes, boil up, toast slathered in jam, raw fish, instant noodles, and oysters populate them. There are pictures of elaborate, festive spreads, though mostly, everyday, casual fare. Some put the call out for tips to improve their loaves of rēwena, for preparing pāua or for laying hāngī. Others recount fond memories sparked by an image of a bowl of porridge or share their delight over a video clip of colossal mussels.

These online communities are like virtual hākari, or feasts, sustained by online ringawera<sup>2</sup> who post what they've caught, grown, gathered, cooked, preserved, smoked, or even picked up from the local takeaway shop. With fishing rods, wooden spoons, forks and smartphones in hand, group members document and share their kai<sup>3</sup> experiences all over Aotearoa and beyond, for anyone with a Facebook account and internet access to observe.

Traditionally, Māori knowledge, including that to do with kai, was passed down orally, among traditional forms of community and within traditional spaces like marae (O'Carroll, 2013c). Today, the internet and social media provide new ways of learning about, engaging with and sharing aspects of kai Māori. This thesis explores how Māori culinary traditions<sup>4</sup> are practised, shared and reimagined in digital spaces. By observing and analysing the digital footprints of two food-based Facebook communities – Kai Maori and Kai Basket NZ – this study examines how cultural transmission and identity construction associated with food occurs in the digital age. In doing so it addresses two key questions:

- *How do Facebook groups contribute to an evolving concept of kai Māori?*
- *What kinds of relationships define these online kai communities?*

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<sup>2</sup> A glossary of terms in te reo Māori is included at the beginning of this thesis, after the table of contents.

<sup>3</sup> The terms kai and kai Māori are used throughout this thesis where relevant. *Kai* is used broadly throughout, to refer to food, ingredients and dishes in relation to Māori contexts. *Kai Māori* is used specifically to refer to the culinary traditions of Māori people which I understand to be fluid, adaptive and nuanced.

<sup>4</sup> Culinary traditions refer to the socially defined and ever-evolving set of methods, practices and customs associated with the preparation and consumption of food that reflect the cultural heritage of a community.

This is a novel study in that it traverses a relatively overlooked area: the intersection of food and Māori identity in online spaces. While there has been a growing interest in kai Māori and, in particular, kai sovereignty (Hutchings, 2015; Hutchings & Smith, 2025; Moeke-Pickering et al., 2015; Morris & Fitzherbert, 2016; Shirley, 2013; Stein et al., 2018; Wehi et al., 2023), little attention has been given to how these themes manifest in online spaces. This gap exists despite social media's pervasiveness within everyday life and its continual reshaping of how food culture is created, shared and understood (Selvakumar et al., 2025). By focusing on this nexus, I hope to elucidate contemporary pathways of identity formation and expression, and evolving beliefs and practices relating to Māori culinary traditions.

## **1.2 Who am I?**

My own social and cultural background is a crucial part of the processes and outcomes of this project. I am a wahine Māori. I whakapapa<sup>5</sup> to Ngāti Maniapoto, Waikato and Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, and, importantly, I whakapapa to Tuurangawaewae Marae<sup>6</sup> which houses what is likely one of the largest marae kitchens in the country. While I am lucky enough to be able to return to my marae, I was born around 100 kilometres away in Grey Lynn, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, and now live just a couple of suburbs away.

In my working life as a journalist, I've largely reported on food. Within this focus, I've spent years exploring kai Māori – its history, its present, its future – in the hopes of reclaiming space in the mainstream where our kai has largely been absent. Writing about food as someone who is Māori but who has occasionally felt like an outsider to their own culture brings with it a sense of discomfort. I can rarely rely on the kinds of conventionally nostalgic edible memories which are often called upon in food writing. Still, food has always been the language I speak and the lens

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<sup>5</sup> Whakapapa often refers to genealogy, but it is also the foundational underpinning of Māori understandings of the world which binds all things, including kai, atua, te taiao, tūpuna and humans.

<sup>6</sup> Waikato-Tainui linguistic convention uses double vowels as opposed to macrons. This convention is generally observed in this thesis when referring to Waikato-Tainui names and places. In all other cases, macrons are used.

through which I understand the world around me. As I've reconnected with my Māoritanga, food has been my way back – a way to reclaim my identity.

This journey, I know, is not mine alone; it's a shared experience among many Māori that is shaped by the ongoing influences of colonisation, and in the face of that, a persistent craving for connection. Because kai Māori is intertwined with all parts of te ao Māori, food, while not the only way in, makes sense as a way of forging connection. It is this personal experience that drew me to these Facebook groups in the first place. And then later, it is what drew me to these communities as a point of research. I first began following one of the groups central to this study, the 'Kai Maori' Facebook group, in 2019, and since then, I've mostly observed from the sidelines. But through this online space, I have discovered a community that shares my love for kai.

Over time, these communities have expanded my understanding of te ao Māori and helped me to reconnect, simply by way of scrolling on my phone. This has taken shape in small, unexpected ways, like learning a new kupu for an ingredient or finding edible commonalities with other Māori. Within the current political climate in Aotearoa, and, indeed, globally, it is especially uplifting to observe as Māori unapologetically celebrate the kai they're eating, and with that, our culture and who we are. These online spaces reflect the diversity of kai Māori and, in a way, mirror my own experience of Māori identity – existing at the intersections of tradition and change.

### **1.3 Theoretical Context for this Study**

#### *Māori Culinary Traditions*

This study is grounded in the concept of 'culinary traditions', a term which is used repeatedly throughout, particularly in relation to Māori culinary traditions. At the most rudimentary level, the term culinary tradition refers to the various methods, practices and customs to do with the preparation and consumption of food, reflecting the cultural heritage of a particular community or social grouping. The development of such traditions tends to be understood as an intergenerational process, whereby the term refers to "Food considered by a population, or a social group, to be part of their own specific combinations of foods consumed and ideas and values on this food handed down from one generation to another" (Cwiertka, 1998).

That culinary traditions are understood as something handed down from the past to the present (Shils, 1981) does not mean that the concept of ‘tradition’ is static. Cwiertka contends that tradition “is a sequence of variations on received and transmitted themes, created by incorporating new elements and removing old” (1998, p. 117), meaning that any food, regardless of origin, has the potential to become traditional. Defining the same concept, Leach (2010) considers culinary traditions in both their material and temporal aspects, describing culinary traditions as an amalgamation of ingredients, material culture, customs and ideas that, like other cultural traditions, evolve to adapt to external influences.

Though the term culinary tradition might not always be explicitly used across studies of food, the concept is omnipresent. Fernandez (1988), for example, thought about culinary traditions as a dynamic and negotiated process. Rather than asking “What is Filipino food?” Fernandez was far more interested in considering “How does food become Filipino?” – a question that understands culinary traditions as a product of ‘indigenisation’, whereby food practices are adopted and shaped by availability, environment, policy, economics, history, technologies and changing tastes. Similarly, this thesis does not aim to ask “What is Māori food?” but, instead, “How does food become Māori?” It is this dynamic and ever-changing conception of culinary tradition that this thesis finds most compelling and applicable in the context of kai Māori.

Consequently, this study approaches the kai Māori culinary tradition like Māori identity more broadly, as inherently negotiated and fluid, rather than rigid and unchanging. This understanding owes much to Beaton (2007) whose analysis of cookbooks delineates kai Māori as a “continuous and evolving tradition”. This, Beaton writes, demonstrates “that an Indigenous people such as Maori can in fact absorb outside influences whilst still retaining an inherently Maori culinary tradition” (Beaton, 2007, p. ii). The way that Māori culinary traditions have been consistently reinvented in response to changing social, economic and political circumstances is set out in detail in Chapter 2, which charts the evolution of kai Māori across three key historical phases: pre-colonial, post-colonial and contemporary. Foundational to this historical outline are the contributions of scholars such as Leach (2010) and Beaton (2007), whose work has been instrumental in this thesis.

This thesis also understands kai Māori to be more than just its tangible, edible components. It is conceptualised as a complex, interconnected and relational practice, that encompasses culturally transmitted rules and metaphysical dimensions. Food, in this interconnected sense, is inseparable from Māori identity. As such, this thesis frames kai Māori, not only as a collection of ingredients, dishes and techniques, but as something defined by its social functioning: as a site where group identities are reaffirmed, cultural identity is performed, and resistance to colonialism is enacted (Heldke, 2003; Huambachano, 2019; Wham et al., 2012; Whyte, 2018).

### *Kai Māori and Identity*

It is well established that food is a marker of both personal (Almerico, 2014; Caplan, 2013; Mitchell, 1995) and shared social identity (Fischler, 1988; Happel, 2012; Joos, 1984; Tibère, 2016), defining social class, lifestyles, gender, family, community, ethnic groups and nationality (Bouttoud, 2016). In short, you are what you eat. Contemplating identity in relation to food, Fischler (1988) describes how food is an expression of both solidarity and separation: “Food is central to our sense of identity. The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently”. The melding of these two markers assists in the formation of the identity of an individual and their identity as a member of a group.

Food can also operate as a site of resistance to reaffirm group identities. Indigenous peoples have the ability to partake in food practices as one vital strategy for resisting colonialism (Heldke, 2003). This is evidenced by First Nations communities in North America who have endured hundreds of years of colonial policies of assimilation. Bodirsky (2008) examined how the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge about food is a necessary component in healing the trauma caused by colonialism. Whyte (2018) and Huambachano (2019) also highlight how the revitalisation of cultural food systems can support cultural resurgence. Food is seen as an inseparable part of Indigenous identity.

Food systems are deeply intertwined with changing conceptualisations of Māori cultural identity and kinship (Wham et al., 2012). Glassey et al. (2023, p. 10) write that: “For Māori, food is valued and symbolises history, culture and community, creating a shared environment to nurture and respect the whenua to provide food for the whānau”. Whether it be through māhinga kai

practices (McKerchar, 2014), traditional gatherings (Wehi, 2023) or within the pages of cookbooks (Leach, 2010), kai Māori is an expression of Māori cultural identity.

In te ao Māori, kai, like many aspects of culture, is woven into community life. Traditionally, kai – from its planting, gathering, harvesting, preparation, preservation, distribution and consumption – is one of the key ways in which community is enacted. Therefore, it is intrinsically tethered to conceptions of community.

Traditional understandings of community within te ao Māori are grounded in whakapapa and collective belonging through iwi, hapū and whānau (O'Regan, 2001). Māori identity has traditionally been underpinned by genealogical ties and shared ties to tūpuna, atua and geographic features and land (Nikora, 2007; Roberts, 2013; Tomlins-Jahnke, 2002). Māori sociologist Tracey McIntosh (2001, p. 142-3) has described Māori identities as ever-changing, and determined by individuals, their environment, surroundings and priorities: “To be Māori is to be part of a collective but heterogeneous identity, one that is enduring but ever in a state of flux”. Taking heed of McIntosh, within this study Māori identity, and by extension, community is understood as fluid and dynamic rather than entirely fixed and immutable.

### *Kai Māori and Community*

Kai is both a marker of identity and a reflection of the affiliations that shape social life. It is through kai preferences and practices – the kinds of kaimoana that we crave the most, the accoutrements of our boil up or the way we make our steamed puddings – that these collective identities are often expressed and maintained. Place holds central importance in Māori community identity (Smith, 2004). It connects people to ancestors and collective histories. Community affiliations are strongly tied to tribal boundaries, whenua and landmarks like mountains, lakes, rivers, forests, and coasts.

The marae, in particular, is a vital space for expressing and sustaining tribal and sub-tribal identity (Barlow, 1991, p. 73). It functions as a collective hub, where rituals and gatherings take place. As Walker (1992, p. 15) writes, “The marae is the focal point of Māori culture and communal activities [...] it was a courtyard, the plaza and meeting-place”. Within it, the wharekai plays a central role – where tribal identity is reproduced through shared food practices, the

collective preparation, eating and serving of local delicacies, along with the inevitable dishwashing.

However, colonisation has disrupted these place-based identities (Robson & Reid, 2001) through processes such as land loss and confiscation, urbanisation, ‘pepper-potting’ policies, and emigration (McIntosh, 2005). In response, spaces for expressing and articulating Māori identity are changing and shifting (Sciascia, 2016). As will be discussed further in this chapter, one such development is the use of social media as a space where online communities convene to promote, encourage and celebrate Māori identity (O’Carroll, 2013c). Some of these online communities are tied to traditional Māori social structures through communities based upon marae, hapū, iwi and whānau groupings. However, online communities can also be formed outside of such traditional social structures (Goodwin, 2011).

### *Kai and Whakapapa*

Whakapapa is fundamental to Māori understandings of the world (Mahuika, 2019a; Mikaere, 2017; Roberts, 2013), and as such, it is a central pillar to the way this thesis understands kai Māori. While often translated as genealogy, whakapapa encompasses more than ancestral lines of descent. Whakapapa is layered and expansive including connections to atua, tūpuna, and the natural world (Burgess & Koroi, 2024; Roberts, 2013). This worldview conceives of existence as a complex web of relationships, or whanaungatanga. Smith and Hutchings (2024) explain that if Māori are mokopuna of the atua associated with particular landscapes and elements of the natural world, then the kai that comes from these places can be thought of as whanaunga. In this context, kai can be understood as whakapapa and whanaungatanga – an embodiment of our relatedness to ngā atua, the natural world, our tūpuna, our communities, ourselves, and to our collective pasts, presents, and futures. The authors write that “Framing food as whanaunga enacts a way of seeing food in more intimate and immediate ways” (p. 4). From that interconnected understanding comes a responsibility to engage with kai in ways that cultivate good connections for ourselves and for future generations (Smith & Hutchings, 2024). Within this framework of kai as whanaungatanga, Burgess and Koroi (2024, p. 27) articulate such connections as “intergenerational intimacies” whereby “kai is whakapapa”. Here, the way we eat binds us to te taiao, to our tūpuna, to those who have planted, harvested, preserved and prepared kai for us –

and to ourselves. In this way, kai is intimately bound to our identities, not just as an expression of it but as part of us and who we are.

This thesis understands kai Māori to be flexible, nuanced and evolving. However, in also understanding kai Māori as embedded within an interconnected web of whakapapa, it is necessary to acknowledge the inherent tensions in framing kai as an adaptive tradition within a context of colonisation. In a capitalist, settler-colonial society – where food systems prioritise profit over the health of people, culture or the environment (Smith & Hutchings, 2024) – uncritically embracing fluidity in culinary practices comes with its risks. Such openness may undermine the relational web of kinship inherent to Māori culinary traditions. This study treats the food practices posted by the members of these online spaces with celebratory acceptance, while still recognising that a considered approach is needed as we reimagine the ongoing evolution of kai Māori in ways that nurture the various relationships linked to kai.

### *Facebook in the Wider Social Media Ecology*

The specific focus of this study is how Māori culinary traditions are expressed and maintained through digital platforms, specifically Facebook. This entails some understanding of the evolution of the platform and how it works – especially as this thesis is also part of, and funded by, a wider, Tikanga in Technology research programme broadly focussed on advancing Indigenous approaches to data ecosystems. While the advent of the internet in the 1980s transformed the nature of social connection, the swift dissemination of Web 2.0 functionalities alongside the falling cost of connecting to the web during the first part of the 21st century has facilitated major advancements in the social potential of the internet (Obar & Wildman, 2015). This evolution has provided for widespread access to online spaces tailored toward hosting interactivity and collaboration, along with new potential for connectivity between these online spaces (Daugherty et al., 2013). Though pioneering literature examining the internet often refers to online spaces – such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram – as “social networking sites” or “social networks” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), the term “social media” is a more relevant term to describe the specific architecture and affordances of contemporary online sites. Obar and Wildman (2015) define social media as any interactive websites or internet applications which allow users to generate and share content with others, create personalised user profiles, and develop online social networks. Social media provides new opportunities for social connection,

access to and transmission of knowledge and culture and political engagement (Papacharissi, 2004).

Since its creation in 2004 as a portal for Harvard students (Grandinetti, 2021), the social media Facebook has grown rapidly and steadily, embedding itself within the everyday lives of billions of people globally (Nowacki, 2024). Over time, it has transformed into what Nowacki (2024) describes as a “multimodal marketplace”, offering users the option to make public posts, to send private messages, to sell items or services, to advertise, to promote events, and, as is central to this study, to create groups. Today, the site is used worldwide and is the most popular social media globally, though Facebook’s foothold may be slipping among younger generations, in favour of fresher sites like TikTok (Nowacki, 2024). Still, it is difficult to overstate Facebook’s significance within contemporary life. Over the past decade, the number of monthly active Facebook users has grown from more than 1.5 billion in 2015 to over 3 billion in 2025 (Hope, 2015; Statista, 2025).

Facebook can be conceptualised as an assemblage of tools, from which users have the ability to select features they believe will best suit their needs (Ahern et al., 2016; Smock et al., 2011). Since the groups feature was launched in 2010, millions of Facebook groups have been created (Ahern et al., 2016). Groups can be seen as one of the many tools in the Facebook toolbelt which enables users to both establish and join communities of people virtually. A quick survey of the Facebook groups I belong to – the Auckland University Students’ Association; a supermarket fanpage; my local community page; a renters’ rights page, a group for Māori journalists; iwi, whānau, hapū and marae communities; a group where members post pictures of their cats – is like an archive of my personal history. They are a collection of social bonds, affiliations and interests from both my past and present. As such, to create or join a group can be seen as a way to perform identity.

In the same way that social networks might be built around sports clubs, marae or workplaces, this type of clustering of people based on a shared interest, identity or affiliation “represents one of the main characteristics of an offline social network” (Guidi et al., 2020, p. 33603). While this type of online clustering can replicate offline social networks, social media has also facilitated new kinds of group formation (Ahern et al., 2016). The Facebook groups feature has made

building communities, created out of choice, simpler (Ahern et al., 2016; Haythornthwaite, 2005). When the groups feature was launched in 2010, reporting at the time suggested that the feature may have initially been conceived as a way for users to organise their existing Facebook friend networks into smaller clusters, akin to “inviting your best friends over for dinner” (Mark Zuckerberg, quoted in Arthur, 2010, n.p). Upon the launch, *The Guardian* emphasised the potential for more intimate groupings, describing the feature as Facebook’s “attempt to mirror the way that people interact in the real world, where we interact with small groups of people such as family, work colleagues and wider friends, rather than everyone at once” (Arthur, 2010, n.p). There are many instances of these smaller, more intimate groupings, where users might form a trusted circle from their online social networks to share photos of their children, or where friends might assemble to organise social sport practice.

At the same time, there are also many groups which are characterised by a broader community structure that is much larger than one user’s Facebook friend list and where most of its members are strangers. These are communities formed “out of groups of people from different backgrounds and histories” (Tenuche, 2018, p. 23). Guidi et al. (2020, p. 33605) write that “from a social point of view, these are the most interesting to study because they consist of people who probably have never met yet are held together by a common interest or goal”. There are, for example, groups with vast populations where members number in the hundreds of thousands, or even millions – like the Instant Pot® Community, which is comprised of 3.2 million group members. Others, like that of my marae which has 896 members or my local suburb’s gardening group which has 684 members, are smaller, more niche and more specific to particular locations – but are still unlikely to be made up of members who all know each other personally. Rather than reproducing offline relationships, what draws these individuals together as a community are shared interests, hobbies or affiliations.

Communities based on common interests, like Facebook groups, are differentiated from ‘ego networks’, which are based entirely on one user and their individual connections (Guidi et al., 2020). When it comes to social media focused on kai Māori various ego networks exist whereby individual Māori creators share their growing, gathering, hunting, preparation, cooking and eating of various kinds of kai to an audience. For example there are kai-focused accounts run by individual content-makers on YouTube and Instagram, like @mahingakai and

@WekaDigitalMediaNZ, each of which predominantly posts content to do with hunting and gathering. More recently, as TikTok has grown in popularity, especially among rangatahi, Māori operated food-centric accounts like @terressakollat, @parisnuku, @raukurahuata, @kai\_katcher, @maorimoa and @kaimoanakid have appeared. Such ego-network-based sites would be useful focal points for future research into how kai Māori practices unfold online.

The Facebook groups central to this study exist at the intersection of an ongoing kai Māori culinary tradition and the innovative ways that Māori are now expressing culinary traditions online. This study has been designed to capture this historic continuity as well as the emerging and ever-evolving practices that shape contemporary Māori culinary traditions and the communities that form around these.

#### **1.4 The Current State of Knowledge**

##### *The Study of Food Online*

In the digital age, the sharing of food has expanded beyond the dining table and into the new technological mediums enabled by the internet. These new opportunities for sharing food online have provided for a subsidiary of the field of food studies that focuses on food in the online or digital realm: exploring the relationships between food, technology and knowledge-sharing (Lupton & Feldman, 2020). In this growing body of digital food research, the focus has largely been within the area of business studies and concentrated on online food stores and businesses (Caldwell, 2012; Grant et al., 2014; Rahman et al., 2020; Suhartanto et al., 2019) as well as digital food photography (Öztaş & Yıldırım, 2024; Pennell, 2018; Taylor & Keating, 2018). There are also instances where the study of digital food has been applied in health research, such as in studies of digital junk food advertising (Andersen et al., 2012; Freeman et al., 2014), healthy eating (Sandberg et al., 2022), food allergies (Anagnostou et al., 2024), and dieting (Hawks et al., 2020; Munro et al., 2024). More closely related to the focus of this research in terms of its focus on cultural transmission are those studies which investigate how specific national, ethnic or diaspora communities have shared their foodways through Skype (Marino, 2019), food blogs (Hegde, 2014; Mannur, 2013), and Instagram (Lynch, 2010; Sharma & Choudhury, 2015; Simunaniemi et al., 2011).

Two significant aspects of contemporary food culture on the internet are the closely related phenomena of “food porn” and meokbang (Donnar, 2017). The digital sharing of food is frequently examined through the fraught concept of “food porn” (Donnar, 2017) – a term that is said to have been coined in 1979 (Lavis, 2017; McBride, 2010), and which has since become ingrained in mainstream digital culture through the rise of food blogs and food-focused websites. In the digital age the term has been deployed “to describe aestheticized visual or verbal representations of food that focus intensely on its desire-inducing qualities” (Lupton, 2020, p. 4). McDonnell (2016, p. 240) articulates “food porn” as “both a voyeuristic practice and a visual aesthetic”, contending that the term can refer not only to the object of food, and the way it is presented in media, but also the practice of photographing and sharing food online. These representations tend to emphasise the unattainable, remarkable, idealised, and – as the term suggests – lustily indulgent, qualities of food.

Meokbang, a social media phenomenon that emerged in South Korea in the early 2010s involves live-streaming or filming the consumption of (typically immense) quantities of food. Meokbang differentiates itself from the typical associations of food porn through its embrace of “ordinary” foods, whereby remarkableness is denoted by overabundance and excess. Within the globalised media and food scape, this genre of eating performance has since gained international popularity and been replicated globally. Donnar (2017) writes that “intimacy, immediacy and community are integral to meokbang” (p. 125) which complicates the boundaries between public and private. In this way, such content illuminates the ways that new media and food might collide in ways that foster more intimate connections between people, even if they are physically distant, at opposite ends of the globe.

The literature on both food porn and meokbang underscores how these digital food practices transcend the materiality of food and eating. Within the context of sharing images of food on social media, Bouvier (2018, p. 157) contends that while digital forms of food cannot replace the entire sensory experience of eating with others offline, such activity is “rich with social, cultural, and relational significance”. Lavis (2017, p. 198) describes this as the “virtual consumption of imagised food”, whereby social media users can partake – even as mere spectators – in the experience and pleasure of food simply by scrolling through social media. By merging the

inherent sociality of both eating and the internet, these practices become compelling sites of community, intimacy and relationships.

### *The Study of Food Sharing Within Facebook Groups*

While there is a growing body of research concerning food online, research which specifically focuses on cultural transmission and identity construction in relation to food within Facebook groups remains sparse. Studies that do exist predominantly emphasise specific concepts to do with nostalgia, remembering and memory-making. These themes are not identical to that of this thesis, but they overlap in important ways. One study, for example, observed and documented posts and comments pertaining to food nostalgia on a Filipino food-related Facebook group during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. The author found that these online postings could be seen as a way of compensating for a lack of face-to-face interactions in everyday life, and revealed notions of collective nostalgia (Cabbuag, 2021).

Two studies, Nguyen (2023) and Inserra (2018) – both of which concentrated on diaspora food communities on Facebook – were particularly influential in the formation of this thesis. Nguyen (2023) examined a Vietnamese food group on Facebook in order to understand how diasporic members of the community used their online foodways sharing to reclaim and legitimate collective memories. She found that these digitised displays of food illustrate the potential sociocultural power of online food sharing, arguing that “[d]igital platforms have effectively transformed the acts of cooking and eating into visually displayed cultural practices” (p. 328).

Inserra’s (2018) study of an all-female Italian Facebook group investigated how this online community constructed Italian identity through sharing food online. Inserra’s work underscores the way that food exists within these spaces as a constant negotiation between cultural nostalgia and cultural creativity and functions as an expression of identity, a link to country and culture, and a way for communities to construct their own identities. Noting the approaches taken by both Inserra and Nyugen, this thesis adopts a similar interest in the formation of community identity and potential for cultural transmission within virtual food practices. Each of these studies has also emphasised the significance of transformation, hybridisation, re-interrogation and sociopolitical resistance within this online food sharing.

Unlike the foregoing studies, the community at the centre of this study is not inherently diasporic. Nevertheless, given the impacts of urban migration of Māori away from traditional homelands (Metge, 1964) or the prevalence of Māori living in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Hamer, 2019; Kukutai & Pawar, 2013), Facebook could be seen to serve a similar function for online Māori communities as for diasporic Vietnamese or Italian communities.

Research on digital Māori food practices is practically non-existent, with only one study having explored kai Māori in online spaces. In an exploration of kai Māori content on TikTok Renall and Te Morenga (2024) applied content analysis to a series of TikTok videos which included the hashtags #kai and #Maori. The study identified a set of “key Māori identity foods” and three core themes relating to the value of kai Māori as: (1) an expression of pride in Māori identity, (2) a way of keeping traditions alive and (3) a way of connecting with te ao Māori. The authors also noted tensions between the beneficial cultural transmission opportunities afforded by TikTok and ethical concerns related to data sovereignty on the platform.

#### *Previous Studies of Māori and Social Media*

While limited research exists that specifically covers food and Māori identity articulation online, the existing body of research examining how Māori identity appears, is formed and is transformed in virtual spaces is relevant to this research.

Goodwin (2011, p. 110), for example, describes social media platforms such as Facebook as a “space of becoming”. Relating to use of Facebook pages, Goodwin describes the democratising and empowerment potential of these spaces which allow Māori new opportunities for cultural negotiations and expression, both collectively and individually.

Similarly, O’Carroll (2013c) examines how social networking sites provide contemporary methods for engaging with aspects of Māori cultural identity. In doing so, she highlights the positive impacts to Māori who are able to express, articulate and learn more about their Māori identity online and further, to contemplate what it means and could mean to be Māori. At the same time, she notes concerns among communities that Māori might be deterred from returning home if traditional knowledge can be accessed from sources beyond the marae and that elements

of identity or relationships might be lost when such knowledge is accessed in ways other than traditional forms of transmission.

In a related study O'Carroll (2013d) considers the idea of "virtual whanaungatanga" and the way in which Māori use social networking sites to connect with iwi, hapū and whānau. Analysing Māori use of Facebook, O'Carroll posits that social media allows for whanaungatanga or relationship building among "those who do not have genealogical connections but are linked through a common purpose to share, engage and interact with each other" (p. 230).

Waitoa et al. (2015, p. 49) highlight how, "in the face of imperialist pressures, indigenous groups use many tools for resistance" and that those tools extend to social media as a form of dissent, activism and global solidarity. However, they note that tensions exist within the use of social media for political engagement among Indigenous peoples. While social media aligns with aspects of tikanga Māori through tino rangatiratanga and whanaungatanga, other features of the online world, such as cultural misappropriation, are at odds with Māori values. The concept of 'e-whanaungatanga' is discussed, in reference to "online spaces of respectful, safe engagement which foster empowering online relationships" (p. 54). Within this focus of the political potential of online spaces, the authors make the important point that among Indigenous groups, cultural identity formation can be considered a political act and that social media can be a platform for this. That is to say, that the sharing of cultural identity within online spaces, illustrated by other research (Goodwin, 2011; O'Carroll, 2013c), can be understood to be in opposition to mainstream hegemony, and is therefore inherently political.

As part of a descriptive analysis of rangatahi Māori use of social media, O'Carroll (2013a) explored how young Māori engaged with Facebook as a tool for self-expression, communication with whānau, maintaining relationships, and accessing information. The study delved into the complexities of using social networking sites and how rangatahi navigate and negotiate these challenges. Participants identified three key uses of the sites: enhancing connectivity with friends, family, and Māori living abroad; facilitating relationship maintenance; and expanding access to information and people.

In an exploration of the challenges that Māori living abroad face in the maintenance of ahikā, O'Carroll (2013b) paid particular attention to the use of social media. While physical presence

has traditionally been required for the exercise of ahikā over land, this notion has evolved as more Māori live away from their tribal hau kāinga and it has become more difficult to physically return. While in-person engagement with culture was preferred among participants surveyed, the research found that where individuals were disconnected by distance, online spaces provided some means for connection and ability to contribute to their hau kāinga. O’Carroll noted that to accommodate the prevalence of dislocation from ancestral lands, alternative ways of enacting traditions and responsibilities are being developed, and that “Without this compromise or temporary medium filling the void, the Māori diaspora would be less well served” (p. 452).

Sciascia (2016) considered how the significance of relationships with land, place, and people for rangatahi Māori expand into the virtual world, through social media like Facebook. While acknowledging the potential risks, Sciascia illustrates how, by using social media, rangatahi were able to ‘indigenise’ Facebook as a tool for identity articulation and expression – even among those living away from their home marae. As Sciascia demonstrates, while social media are separate from the important spatial aspects of traditional Māori identities, whereby connections to place and people serve as foundational to a sense of belonging, rangatahi were regularly expressing tribal affiliations, learning about ancestral knowledge and experiencing a sense of belonging to their homeland within these online spaces.

Others have examined how social media is being used within the revitalisation of te reo Māori (Keegan & Cunliffe, 2014), to share humorous memes which operate as forms of decolonisation by way of critiques of Pākehā actions and forging of kotahitanga among Māori (Morrison-Young & Bres, 2023), to manage knowledge around whakapapa (Reihana, 2014), for broadcasting tangihanga (O’Carroll, 2015) and by Māori living in Australia to maintain close links with Māori culture and whānau from home, while also establishing a hybridised identity in Australia (Harwood, 2015).

## **1.5 The Contribution of this Study**

This project draws on the fields of Indigenous data sovereignty (detailed below) and food studies to examine two Facebook groups which are centred around the creation, consumption and sharing of kai Māori. I hope to address gaps within the current literature by illuminating some of

the social functions, practices and significance of this segment of kai Māori Facebook groups within the context of Māori culinary traditions.

Access to culturally appropriate food and customs is necessary for Indigenous peoples' rights to tino rangatiratanga (Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Such collective rights are recognised by Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This is because food is considered to be an inseparable part of Indigenous identity, including Māori identity. This identity is not fixed – and consequently the way kai expresses Māori values and identity shifts over time. It is necessary then to contemplate how Māori have eaten and are eating.

For this reason, this thesis aims to contribute to understanding the historical continuity of kai Māori, how Māori eat today and, potentially, how we might eat in the future. In contributing to research in online communities more generally, and in particular Indigenous online communities, I also hope to support transparency around the potential implications, limitations and benefits of using social media to share this kind of data.

## **1.6 Methodological Approach**

My interest in this topic stems from a deep personal interest in kai Māori as a means of cultural connection, as well as my prior involvement with these online communities before undertaking this study. The methodological approach, which involved observing both groups and analysing textual data by way of ethnographic content analysis, was guided by a desire to contribute to the existing literature on Māori culinary traditions, with a focus on collecting data that would be useful for this purpose. This approach was also moulded by a strong sense of responsibility to protect the personal information of group members throughout the research process.

Kaupapa Māori principles, which provide a platform for research to be conducted using Māori cultural practices and Māori worldviews (Barnes, 2008; Bishop, 1996; Cram, 2019; Smith, 1997; Smith, 2012) are woven throughout the thesis and are central to its object and aims. However, because Kaupapa Māori research on online Māori communities is not well developed, I have had to create my own ethical approach, drawing on the Māori and Indigenous data sovereignty literature and the wider research on the ethics of using social media for research.

### *Ethics and Māori Data Sovereignty*

This project raises complex ethical considerations about the secondary use of data posted on social media websites in settings where the boundary between public and private is porous and blurred. As much of social life has shifted online, an ever more significant portion of individuals' social lives are documented and displayed on social media platforms. The opportunities presented by these platforms to observe individuals and communities and to undertake new and useful forms of social research has seen sites like Facebook become crucial tools for researchers (Wilson et al., 2012). However, as online research remains a relatively new area of enquiry there are limited guidelines addressing the new ethical questions and challenges peculiar to these digital landscapes (Franz et al., 2019). There is a marked lack of consistency in terms of how researchers approach the ethics of the secondary use of social media data. For example, a systematic review of social media-based public health research focused on Facebook found that less than half (48%) sought institutional ethical approval and only 10% sought and obtained informed consent from Facebook users (Lathan et al., 2023). Users' written content appeared in nearly two thirds (64%) of papers, with most of them including verbatim quotes. A separate review of 23 studies that used Facebook data for qualitative health research (Franz et al., 2019) found that most lacked detailed descriptions of their methods, especially in relation to data extraction, and the authors noted the lack of practical guidelines to assist researchers.

The way data is collected and used by social media sites like Facebook gives rise to critical concerns around Māori and Indigenous data sovereignty (Brown et al., 2023; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; Swartz et al., 2024; Walter et al., 2021). Māori data sovereignty refers to the inherent rights and interests that Māori have in relation to the collection, ownership, and application of Māori data (Te Mana Raraunga, 2018). Relatedly, Māori data governance is concerned with the practices and policies which enable Māori individuals and collectives to have control over their own data. A fundamental principle of Māori data sovereignty is therefore the right to own and govern the use of Māori data generated by Māori peoples (Brown et al., 2023; Renall & Te Morenga, 2024; Te Mana Raraunga Māori Data Sovereignty Network, 2018). However, once personal information is shared on Facebook, the way this information flows lies beyond the individual's control (Mansour & Francke, 2021). This means, "Māori may unknowingly lose control over personal and cultural data when sharing aspects of their identity and heritage on social media platforms" (Renall & Te Morenga, 2024, p. 15). While platforms like Facebook

may enable the maintenance and performance of culture, they also open the door to its appropriation (Brown & Nicholas, 2012). Content shared on Facebook can be viewed, leaked, harvested, and used by third parties in unintended, harmful and sometimes malicious ways. Facebook collects expansive amounts of personal data from users, including the groups users belong to (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Facebook Data Policy, 2022). This data is extracted and used in order to sell targeted advertisements and, more recently, to train its generative AI models (De & Imine, 2020; Taylor, 2024). The term ‘surveillance capitalism’ was coined to describe this far-reaching collection and commodification of personal data by corporations which is driven by a profit-making incentive (Zuboff, 2023).

Examinations of Māori use of Facebook must also take into account how the site has been exploited to facilitate political harm against Indigenous communities globally. Facebook – or more specifically its parent company Meta – is a key actor in the global expansion of data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Social media is not a politically neutral space, decoupled from the offline realities and forces that constitute contemporary colonialism and it can therefore reinforce offline hegemonies (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007). Research has found Indigenous peoples disproportionately experience trolling, cyberbullying, and other types of digital violence (Carlson & Frazer, 2021b; Carlson & Kennedy, 2021; Kennedy, 2020). Criticism has been directed at Facebook, and specifically Facebook Groups, for its platforming of misinformation, proliferation of far right content and enabling the organisation of real-life violence and radicalisation that has negatively impacted Indigenous peoples, along with other marginalised groups globally. For example, in the lead up to the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum, campaigners for the ‘No’ vote used Facebook to amplify misinformation. Australian research and policy organisation Reset.Tech (2023) found that only 4% of posts containing independently assessed misinformation about the electoral process were marked or taken down after three weeks. In January 2025, Meta chief executive officer Mark Zuckerberg announced that Facebook’s longstanding fact-checking programme, a policy instituted to curtail the spread of misinformation, would come to an end, as part of a broader deregulation shift across the site (Montgomery, 2025). Critics of this shift have warned that without robust protections, platforms risk becoming sites of misinformation, harassment, and unethical practices (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022).

Though this study is focused on how Māori culinary traditions might be evolving through the use of social media sites such as Facebook, and how they give rise to virtual communities, I am very aware of the problematic ways in which data harvesting and data colonialism is occurring largely unchecked on these platforms. This project attempts to uphold the MDSov principles developed by Te Mana Raraunga the Māori Data Sovereignty Network, and particularly relevant are the principles that concern upholding the dignity and mana of the community being researched, as well as the significance of informed consent, which became central to my ethical reflections within my methodology (Te Mana Raraunga Māori Data Sovereignty Network, 2018). I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 3.

Given the ethically complex nature of Facebook as a platform, it was important to carefully consider the ethical implications of my research design, which applies digital ethnographic content analysis to study these online communities. This study gathered textual and visual data from these groups without disclosing my role as a researcher and without the explicit consent of members – a methodological approach commonly referred to as ‘lurking’ (Gelinat et al., 2017). While this strategy raises significant ethical questions, it was adopted for important practical and methodological reasons outlined in Chapter 3.

While the ethics of ‘lurking’ are subject to ongoing debate among scholars, and raise particular questions for Māori research, I have endeavoured to uphold principles of respect, accountability and reciprocity (Te Mana Raraunga Māori Data Sovereignty Network, 2018). Within the specific context of this study, I felt that this approach was justified by the nature of the groups studied, the type of data collected, as well as the precautions taken to protect the privacy of group members. These precautions included obtaining informed consent from group members before reproducing written quotes or photographs, avoiding sensitive content, and ensuring the names of group members are not reproduced. Where consent has not been able to be obtained, quotes have been paraphrased to avoid traceability.

These protective privacy measures were essential in balancing the ethical risks associated with ‘lurking’. Still, given this study’s adoption of MDSov principles, and the centrality of Māori identity within this study, a thorough and transparent justification for this approach is needed.

My approach is therefore explained in more detail in Chapter 3, where I discuss the implications of lurking as a methodological challenge within online research.

## **1.7 Thesis Structure**

In this chapter I have established the landscape of kai Māori Facebook groups, including the two which are central to this study while describing the intersecting concepts of culinary tradition, kai Māori and whakapapa which underpin this thesis. A summary of the existing literature around online indigeneity and the politics of social media has been discussed, which highlights the lack of consideration given previously to Facebook as a site of culinary tradition for Māori. I have also introduced my research design along with the ethical questions arising from research within online Māori spaces and communities.

In addressing my two research questions, it was necessary to broadly demonstrate kai Māori as an evolving culinary tradition. This led to the development of Chapter 2, which maps the historical trajectory of kai Māori from its pre-colonial origins, to modern-day contexts, therefore setting the foundation for the contemporary expressions of kai Māori existing on Facebook.

In Chapter 3 I explain my research design in regard to ethnographic data analysis of data collected from digital communities and places. This chapter considers the methodological application of ethnographic data analysis within online Māori spaces and communities, and further, outlines the ethical questions arising from the use of ‘lurking’ as a method.

Chapters 4 and 5 constitute the analysis and discussion of my findings from this research, drawing from the literature and the online observations of digital images, video and text in relation to my two research questions. The first of these chapters is titled “‘Kai Māori 2.0’, the Facebook group as a site of evolving culinary tradition’ and illustrates the ways that kai Māori traditions are continued, embodied and negotiated through these spaces. This chapter posits that codified aspects of Māori culinary traditions hold enduring significance, and that even in instances where dishes diverge from such traditions, kai often remains anchored in ancestral practices and values. The second of these chapters, “‘Breaking bread’”: forging community online through kai’ examines the groups in relation to my second research question. As these online communities are not bound by traditional conceptions of Māori community, this chapter

illustrates how group members establish whanaungatanga within these online spaces, through forms of social connection, shared longing, collective experiences and knowledge sharing.

The concluding chapter of this thesis considers these kai Māori Facebook groups as virtual hākari – online gatherings where food serves as the focal point for identity and community to form and reconnect. Through these contributions of digital kai in the form of photographs, video and text, cultural practices of kai are sustained, adapted and transmitted. Drawing on both the literature and analysis, this chapter makes the argument that these sites, while not physical or traditional sites of community or cultural affiliation, are not sites of separation, but rather inclusive spaces that invite reconnection and a sense of belonging that is particularly relevant for Māori living away from their homelands. By examining these online spaces, the chapter contemplates their potential in continuing and evolving Māori culinary traditions, positioning them as dynamic expressions of Indigenous cultural continuity that challenge dominant discourse that often confines kai Māori mainstream frameworks – and therefore as active sites of decolonial resistance.

## Chapter 2: Tracing the Evolution of Kai Māori

### 2.1 Navigating a Culinary Tradition

A voyage into the history of kai Māori is necessary for this thesis, both to understand the key features of kai Māori and how the practices, knowledge and beliefs which underpin it have been communicated over time. While images of toasted rēwena, freshly caught fish, bowls of steamed pudding and more, shared by Facebook users, are illuminating in and of themselves, understanding how this content might be situated within the wider historic evolution of kai Māori offers vital context.

There are two ways in which the history of kai Māori plays a role in this thesis. Firstly, understanding the trajectory of kai Māori is essential to defining it as a culinary tradition and examining how Facebook groups may contribute to its evolving definition. To achieve this, I outline a history of kai Māori, divided into three historical phases: pre-colonial, colonial and decolonial/indigenising. Secondly, given this thesis' focus on kai Māori in the digital space, it is important to review the historical evolution of communication and its impact on disseminating knowledge about kai Māori. This transformation can be simplified into three phases: oral, written and digital.

None of these – pre-colonial, colonial, decolonial; oral, written, digital – are fixed or mutually exclusive. It would be an oversimplification to depict them as neatly isolated segments that align perfectly with specific dates or events. Instead, like all historical narratives, they are complex and intertwined, with practices being sustained, abandoned, transformed and reinvigorated over time (Mahuika, 2019b). These categories are also contested, with their meanings dependent on the academic or political context in which they are used. While it is unfortunate that colonial history frames these categories, the impact of European arrival and the unfolding violence of colonialism on te ao Māori (Belich, 1996, 2000; Pool, 2015) and, within that, kai Māori, is undeniable (Hutchings et al., 2018). As such, employing this conventional categorisation is a deliberate choice.

This chapter does not claim to be exhaustive. Indeed, to describe the foods prepared, shared and consumed by Māori in comprehensive historical detail would require a study of its own. This

chapter instead aims to demonstrate in general the processes by which these shared food traditions have been forged and the means and methods of its transmission across time, from oral traditions to the beginnings of digital communication.

### *Pre-European Culinary Traditions*

The first waka of Eastern Polynesian voyagers arrived on the shores of Aotearoa between AD 800 and 900 (Walker, 2004). In this period, spanning several centuries before the arrival of Europeans, Māori forged the foundations of a culinary tradition. More than just fuel, kai was an integral part of the everyday rhythms of ancient Māori society, which fulfilled a role that was of vital spiritual, social and ritual significance.

In this chapter the identifier “Māori” is used in a pre-colonial context. However, it is important to note that the concept of a unified Māori identity is relatively modern. As Durie describes, “Before European contact, the word māori simply meant normal or usual. There was no concept of a Māori identity in the sense of cultural or even national similarities” (2006, p. 53). Instead, identity was primarily defined by hapū and iwi affiliations, as well as ties to the natural environment.

The history which follows is a partial expression of the whakapapa of a Māori culinary tradition. The plates of kai which adorn wharekai tables or are posted on a kai Māori Facebook page descend from this history, linking the past, present and future (Graham, 2005, 2009). Whakapapa is the very fabric of Māori existence and understanding of the world (Mahuika, 2019a). Its importance in making sense of history is emphasised by Binney (1987, p. 21) who writes “genealogy is the backbone of all Maori history”. As a methodology, whakapapa is used as a tool by Māori to comprehend natural phenomena, origins, connections and relationships (Royal, 1998) and serves as a foundation for organising knowledge about the creation and evolution of all things (Barlow, 1991).

While understanding and experiences of spiritual concepts vary iwi to iwi, kai Māori is embedded in spiritual, interconnected and reciprocal relationships between people and land (Shelling, 2023). The origins of kai Māori lie in the narratives of Ranginui (sky father) and Papatūānuku (earth mother) whose union prompted a network of kinship of which all of existence descends from (Smith & Hutchings, 2024). This interconnected web connects all that

resides on earth and creates the potential to trace lineage from human ancestors to pre-human forebears, and finally, to the gods (Haami & Roberts, 2002; Roberts, 2013). Following the separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku, Tūmataunga (god of war and human activities) created incantations to make foods abundant and easy to obtain by humans. Kai, then, is imbued with an explicitly spiritual dimension, shaped by the environment and through shared whakapapa with atua (Smith & Hutchings, 2024). Within such creation stories there is no rigid distinction between the physical and spiritual realms (Mikaere, 2011). Kai links the present with the very origins of specific food sources, as a living connection to atua and ancestors through time and space. Kai is intimately intertwined with te taiao, and with the geographical features – mountains, rivers, seas, lakes, forests – it emanates from. Like all elements of life, both kai and the environments that kai is cultivated and gathered from are imbued with mana, tapu and mauri (Marsden, 2003).

## **2.2 The Beginnings of a Kai Māori Culinary Tradition**

### *Eastern Polynesian Traditions*

Kai is an expression of Māori whakapapa across Te Moananui-a-Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean. Archaeological evidence and East Polynesian traditions recorded by early European visitors paints a picture of the lives of the Eastern Polynesian ancestors of Māori ahead of their departure to Aotearoa. Nearly all Oceanic communities classified starchy foods, such as root crops and dense fruits, as ‘kai’ (Kirch & O’Day, 2003). This starchy kai component was considered the essential foundation of tropical meals. Meanwhile, flesh foods, like fish or birds, formed the less significant relish or trimmings of the meal, sometimes called kihi or kinaki (Leach, 2010). In Hawaiki, foods were largely accumulated through gardening and fishing, and by way of domesticated animals. Coconut, breadfruit, banana, and root crops like taro and yams made up the majority of diets. Kūmara, which may have been introduced through South American exchange (Harburg, 2013), was comparatively tolerant to drought and therefore an essential crop (Leach, 2010).

### *Arrival in Aotearoa*

Adaptation characterised the early developments of kai Māori as Polynesian ancestors learned to survive among climates, soils and food resources vastly different to the tropical Pacific Islands

they had left behind (Leach, 2010). Many staple food items such as the bananas, breadfruit and coconuts brought by the first settlers on waka from across the ocean could not be cultivated in Aotearoa due to its unique climate and geography (Pollock, 1992). However, other crops – kūmara, uwhi, taro, hue and the cabbage tree – survived the relocation and were able to be cultivated (Bassett et al., 2004). Such variations would have led to adjustments in the typical composition of meals. While Aotearoa offered an abundance of high-energy fats and oils from animal sources, it lacked the familiar starchy tubers and fruits they were accustomed to, meaning that it would have been difficult to assemble the sorts of everyday meals that had sustained their Polynesian ancestors (Leach, 2010).

### *Gardening*

Polynesian ancestors were successful gardeners in the warm, humid climate of the islands they had left behind. Those skills were put to the test in Aotearoa with its cooler nights and frosts. These new conditions necessitated the development of innovative methods for gardening, storage, and fortification. These innovations were, as Leach notes, crucial to the “remarkable persistence of Polynesian gardening in this country” (2010, p. 20).

Perhaps driven by cravings for the carbohydrates that had been a staple of their ancestors, it was under these new conditions where the cultivation of kūmara in Aotearoa was adapted to suit the cooler climate (Williams, 2004) and, because of their immense significance, their planting was highly ritualised (Addis, 2008).

A key figure in this continuation of cultivation practices is Whakaotirangi. According to Tainui oral traditions, she carried the plants and seeds of important plants like hue, taro, para, aute, karaka, and most significant of all, the kūmara, on the journey to Aotearoa. Tainui tradition recounts that Whakaotirangi landed at Kāwhia in Waikato and, after a period of experimentation and observations, moved to Aotea to establish Hawaiki Iti, a garden, where she made various scientific discoveries, including developing new techniques for growing kūmara (Jones & Biggs, 1995; McIvor & Forde, 2021).

### *Hunting, Fishing and Gathering*

Alongside cultivable foods, the ingredients available also consisted of a number of gathered and hunted foods from the ocean, lakes, streams, rivers and forests – much of which would have been

unfamiliar. Fish, flightless birds and a remarkable array of shellfish were enjoyed by ancestral Māori who had acquired a vast knowledge of species and the most effective tools and techniques for catching them. Both old and new preparation methods were applied to these ingredients (Beaton, 2008; Pollock, 2000).

Despite this expansive and growing body of knowledge around procuring and processing foods, there were still times where crops failed due to weather conditions; where food stocks went bad; where the seas were too rough to fish; or where hunters returned empty handed. In these times ancestral Māori adapted again, by gathering wild or feral plants. In doing so they were summoning the knowledge of their Polynesian ancestors, which had equipped them with essential survival skills as to what might be safe to eat in Aotearoa, and processes for making them edible (Leach, 2006).

The types of foods gathered were numerous and diverse. Fuller (1978) lists an extraordinarily diverse list of plants that were gathered by Māori, including, but not limited to: tī and nīkau (the hearts of the leaves were eaten raw or cooked), native orchids, pānako (truffles), hīnau berries (which were dried, pounded and steamed as cakes), tutu berries (which were mashed, strained and the juice left in gourds until it jellied), raupō roots and pollen (which could be baked into cakes called pungapunga), gum from mānuka, nectar from flax-flowers and seaweeds like karengo and rimu. Some of these foods, such as tutu berries, took specific processing to transform them from being poisonous to edible, while others like tawa and hīnau needed laborious processing to improve their palatability. Some species of seaweed underwent an elaborate cooking process before consuming. For example, rimurehia, a type of seaweed, contained a complex carbohydrate, carrageen, which was used in the preparation of jellies (Turner, 2003). Cabbage trees (tī) were cooked until sugar crystals formed – one of the few sweet foods available in Aotearoa.

One staple food, aruhe or fernroot, held status above even kūmara because it could be found through most of the year and grew prolifically all over Aotearoa. The starchy vegetable's vital status is underscored by its association with the deity of uncultivated foods Haumia-tiketike, and its description by Fuller (1978, p. 3) as “the last and always dependable barrier between the Māori and starvation”. The rhizomes of the plant were harvested and roasted and sometimes

turned into cakes called komeke, which, as Fuller observes, “were sometimes eaten with a form of jelly made from tutu berries” and on special occasions formed into cakes or puddings (1978, p. 6).

The processing of raw ingredients like aruhe illustrates the persistence of traditional Polynesian “pudding” practices – knowledge of which would have accompanied Polynesian ancestors on the journey to Aotearoa. In the Polynesian tradition, puddings use a starchy component (often taro) along with a lubricant (usually coconut oil) to create a homogenous consistency like a paste or batter, which often goes on to be cooked (Su’a-Huirua, 1987) – the complex processing conferring a high value to the finished product (Leach, 2010). Māori ancestors adapted this logic to available ingredients such as in the case of the traditional Māori pudding, roroī, which is made from grated kūmara (Leach, 2010). Echoing the Polynesian tradition, these dishes were reserved for visitors and hākari.

### *Cooking, Preserving and Fermenting*

Although earthenware pottery had a place in the early West Polynesian kitchens of their ancestors, there is no evidence that such pots were used in Aotearoa. Fuller (1978, p. vii) has surmised that the lack of firing clay or pottery in pre-contact Māori material culture meant that “methods of cooking were thus severely limited”; however, Māori in fact employed a wide range of cooking methods. A diversity of methods from the Polynesian culinary tradition were transplanted to Aotearoa and adjusted to suit the cooler climate and the larger pieces of meat derived from animals like moa and seals. Containers to hold liquids included gourds, wooden bowls, bull kelp and vessels made from stone. Food was cooked by a hāngī, geothermal steam, or by roasting, grilling or baking with fire or hot ashes (Beaton, 2007; Taute et al., 2022). Though Māori ancestors had no earthenware pots for boiling, it has been mentioned in the literature that pre-European Māori employed inventive methods for boiling, such as adding hot rocks to liquids or constructing small bowl-holding platforms above hāngī (Best, 1916; Taylor, 1855).

One of the most enduring and recognised forms of Māori cooking is the hāngī, or earth oven which are prevalent throughout Polynesia. While methods vary, hāngī typically involve digging a shallow pit and heating stones with a fire. Ingredients are then placed atop the stones and covered with leaves or mats, and finally, a layer of soil to contain the steam which cooks the

food. Hāngī are imbued with a significant spiritual dimension – related to dispersing tapu (Barlow, 1991), connection to the earth, and as social significance through the collective preparation and knowledge sharing inherent to the process which likely explains their ongoing use and centrality within kai Māori in contemporary times.

Māori developed a number of methods for preserving foods which were critical for survival, but also to ensure food was readily available for potential visitors. Fish were preserved by drying, as were shellfish which could be threaded onto strings called takiaho (Anon, 1952; Buck, 1929; Papakura, 1938) and left to dry in the sun. Kina, when gathered, were typically eaten raw due to their perishable nature (Papakura, 1938), however could also be preserved through fermentation by storing in freshwater, or burying underground (Hudson et al., 2001). Meanwhile, birds such as kereru and tītī were preserved by cooking and bottling them in their own fat in sealed containers.

Another form of preservation was achieved via rua kūmara (kūmara storage pits). Kūmara were stored in underground rua pits, which were roofed, drained and sealed in order to maintain a reliable supply. Preserved meat, fish, shellfish, water, vegetables and fruit were also stockpiled in food stores, called pātaka or whata, using contraptions to keep rats, rot and other hungry organisms out. These food stores could take many forms: stages, raised shelters, platforms erected on posts or trees, or racks. Whether elaborate or unadorned, food stores were manifestations of centuries of accumulated knowledge necessary for survival in Aotearoa (Best, 1916).

### *Feeding People*

As these food stores indicate, sharing kai was an important component of everyday life. One mode of kai sharing was through hākari (or kai hau kau), or ritual communal feasts as part of special events, such as births, marriages, harvesting, political gatherings, victory in war and tangihanga (Firth, 1973). At hākari attended by guests from other tribes, the mana of the hosts would depend on their ability to provide a generous abundance of kai to their guests, who could number in the thousands. Kai in this context reflected local culinary nuances and was used to demonstrate the status and economic power of the hosts, as well as manaakitanga (McKerchar et al., 2014). The concept of manaakitanga, intertwined with hospitality, kindness, and respect towards others, is a fundamental principle within te ao Māori (Hook & Raumati, 2011).

Hākari could be enormous affairs with an array of opulent fare prepared by the hosts, which would sometimes be arranged on specially erected stages. These scaffolding-like structures could be extraordinary in size and height. At an 1836 banquet at Matamata, a European attendee counted 8000 baskets of potatoes, 500,000 eels, 800 pigs and 15 casks of tobacco (Best, 1916). Although in this same account, the attendee also describes hākari stages stretching from half a mile to two miles long, which seems rather absurd.

**Figure 1** *Cuthbert Charles Clarke, The Stage Erected to Contain the Food at the Feast Given by the Native Chiefs, Bay of Islands, September 1849*



*From. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Ref: B-030-007.*

The potential magnitude of hākari, along with their capacity for foreign social bonds, is demonstrated in the story of how the town of Ngāruawāhia acquired its name. The name is derived from the 17th-century love story of Te Ngaere, a Waikato chief, and Heke-i-te-rangi, a Ngāti Maniapoto woman. Their elopement caused a rift between their two tribes, but reconciliation was forged through a great feast. At this hākari, Te Ngaere began the festivities by making a proclamation: “wāhia ngā rua”, meaning “break open the food pits”. This feast, which lasted several days and nights, restored the bonds between the two tribes. The nearby Hākarimata

ranges also derive their name from this event, with “hākari kai mata” meaning “uncooked food mountain”, mirroring the abundance of food prepared for the guests which resembled the nearby hills (Jones & Biggs, 1995; Swarbrick, 2010). Centuries later, these names and the enduring kinship between the tribes continue to commemorate the lasting impression of that bountiful, and presumably exquisite, hākari.

As this particular hākari illustrates, feasts and the ritual exchange of food helped to maintain and build inter- and intra-tribal relations. Stevens (2003) emphasises the significance of the practice of food exchanges at gatherings, with reference to Kai Tahu – however, these exchanges were important for Māori across Aotearoa as a way of acquiring foods that were difficult, or even impossible to acquire in their own rohe. Though in contemporary times money is more frequently exchanged as a form of koha at such occasions, in pre-colonial times gifts of kai were common and “reflected the variety in geographic abundance” (Neill et al., 2015, p. 91) whereby “those who lived inland would take the bounty of the forests and rivers; and those who lived close to the sea would take fish, seaweed and shellfish” (Barlow, 1991, p. 49).

Ways of being, knowing and doing surrounding kai were localised and seasonal. Various customs with tribally dependent nuances governed the gathering, planting, harvesting, cooking, preservation and storage of foods. These served as protective measures and reflected intimate understandings of the environment (Ihi Research, 2023). Rāhui practices like those which restrict the use of land, sea, rivers, forests and gardens allowed food sources to recover and replenish (McCormack, 2011). Localised conceptions of time and knowledge around maramataka were also heavily enmeshed with practices around food.

While this thesis looks specifically at the evolving concept of kai Māori in the context of Facebook, this represents just one mode of communication within an expansive line of transmitting kai-related knowledge. Before European contact, such knowledge would have been transmitted predominantly by way of an oral culture, handed down by voice over generations through kōrero tuku iho, pūrākau, whakapapa, whakataukī, kōrero and waiata, as well as visual art and first-hand experience (Mahuika, 2012).

### 2.3 Culinary Change in Colonial Contexts

The arrival of Europeans saw another phase of adaptation by Māori. This period saw the formation of a collective Māori identity in opposition to British colonists. Alongside that came the development of a shared Māori culinary tradition – one distinct from that of the new settlers. This evolving culinary tradition was initially shaped by the new ingredients, equipment and techniques, of European, mostly British origins, which were adapted by Māori to suit their own tastes, and incorporated with pre-existing methods and ingredients (Fuller, 1978).

Although food inevitably plays a central role in all historical developments, there is little academic literature specifically documenting the process of culinary colonisation in Aotearoa. It is therefore useful to look at the literature regarding other groups who have comparable experiences of colonisation. Filipino writer Doreen Gamboa Fernandez (1988, p. 219) outlines the process of culinary evolution in the Philippines over many centuries of trade, migration and colonisation: “Philippine cuisine, as dynamic as any phase of culture that is alive and growing, has changed through history, absorbing influences, indigenizing, adjusting to new technology and tastes, and thus evolving”.

While Fernandez describes a culinary transformation that is specific to the Philippines, in a similar fashion, Māori culinary traditions evolved in response to first encounters between Māori and Europeans in 1769 which brought new ingredients, techniques and technology, and then through the ongoing processes of colonisation, in particular, the brutal impacts of land alienation, assimilation, urbanisation and environmental degradation.

#### *Change by Osmosis*

Many culinary developments took place in Aotearoa before the formal process of colonisation began. In 1769 Māori were first exposed to European ingredients and material culture. Early cross-cultural exchange of food between Māori and settlers took place through gift exchange and trade (Petrie, 2006). European explorers, whalers, missionaries and settlers introduced new foods such as white potato, maize, pigs, wheat and various kinds of fruit which slowly filtered through Māori culinary traditions. Being skilled horticulturalists, well-attuned to Aotearoa’s climate and soil types, Māori were able to quickly adopt a wide variety of European foods for their own purposes and introduced foods were eventually grown by Māori for trade (Leach, 2010). By the

1840s, Māori were growing and supplying these new crops for settler populations, passing ships and overseas markets (King, 2004; Pool, 2015). In 1853 for example, 2000 waka loads of fruit and vegetables – including potatoes, maize, onion, cabbages, peaches, kūmara, pumpkins, grapes, melons, apples and quinces – cultivated by Māori were unloaded at Onehunga in Auckland (Veart, 2013).

Though potato varieties existed before European arrival (Best, 1916), the white potato is said to have first been introduced to Aotearoa by French explorer Jean de Surville, who arrived in Hokianga Harbour in 1769. As this new type of starch was similar to kūmara, cultivation was easily understood and they grew prolifically. Potatoes became a staple Māori food crop, assimilated into traditional food practices such as hāngī. And as they were so sought after by Pākehā, they were “cultivated extensively” (Petrie, 2006, p. 32) as a valuable form of trading currency.

Maize was another newcomer. The earliest recorded instance of it in Aotearoa was in 1772 by French privateer Marion du Fresne (Yen, 1959). Without access to equipment for processing corn, Māori applied traditional methods to create the fermented corn-based dish kānga wai, in which corn is treated akin to berries like hīnau and karaka which required a lengthy process of water steeping in water (Earle, 1909; Leach, 1983). In other cases, Polynesian pudding practices were applied by baking or steaming maize into cakes called kānga waru (Keelan-Peebles, 2022). Other introduced ingredients were similarly integrated into Māori culinary traditions in imaginative ways (Leach, 1983). For example, cabbages were used in hāngī as leaf wrappers, turnips preserved similarly to kao (dried kūmara), marrow was treated like the gourd, while pork became an essential component of hāngī (Leach, 2010).

### *Wheat and Breadmaking*

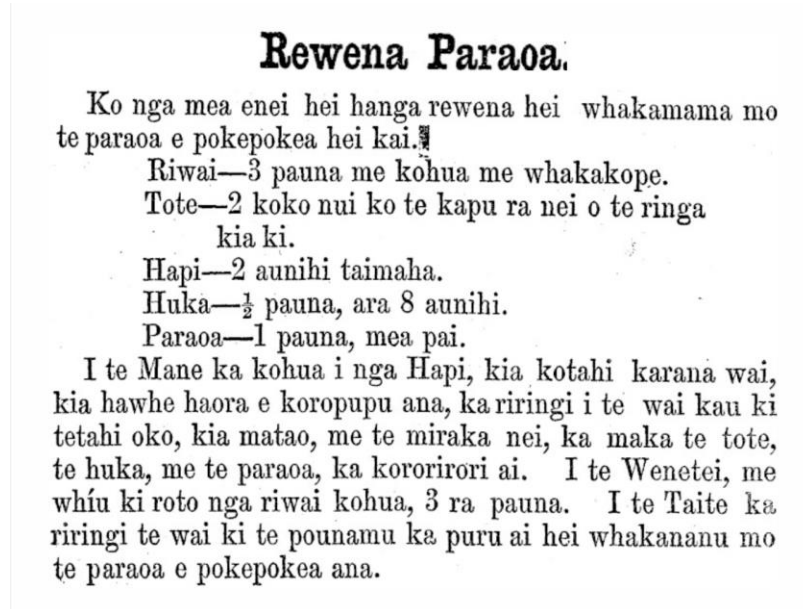
Wheat, however, took longer to be universally established within Māori food production (Leach, 1983). This is likely because it did not resemble any other crop already grown in Aotearoa, and required entirely different techniques and technology to grow and process (Petrie, 2006). But as early as 1814, it was reported that Māori had developed an appetite for bread (Petrie, 2006). The first Māori-owned water mill was established in 1846 at Aotea Harbour and as more groups around the country invested in technology to process wheat, surplus product became a growing

commodity within the Māori economy after the needs of the community had been met (Petrie, 2006). Throughout the 1850s, Tainui tribes were exporting wheat to the gold miners in Victoria and California (O'Malley, 2024).

The significance of Tainui wheat production is illustrated in historical accounts of Rangiaowhia. O'Malley (2024, n.p.) writes of the vast horticultural abundance at Rangiaowhia in the mid-1800s, where “Wheat fields stretched as far as the eyes could see”. The people of Rangiaowhia not only grew wheat and produced flour, they also baked loaves of bread on a vast scale. A Pākehā brick maker was recruited to make 2700 bricks for an oven so large that, by 1853, the people of Rangiaowhia were able to bake 400 loaves at a time, meaning they “could provide a breakfast of tea and bread for the party from Kāwhia who were then helping them with further mill work” (Petrie, 2006, p. 127).

Following a visit to the area in 1849, Governor George Grey told the Colonial Office that he had “never seen a more thriving or contented population in any part of the world”. Like many other North Island Māori, the people of Rangiaowhia had become “wheat growers, flour millers and bread bakers, feeding their own people, and with the surplus enhancing their economic independence” (Leach, 2010, p. 40). This demonstrates that despite the adoption of commercial crops and labour-saving devices, many of the collectively based social and economic aspects of Māori work, land use and food distribution endured (Petrie, 2006; Pool, 2015).

**Figure 2** *Instructions for Making Rēwena Starter and Bread*



*From. Ko Aotearoa/ Maori Recorder*, vol. 1, issue 2, 1 January 1862, p. 30.

Breadmaking was adopted by Māori too. These specific adaptations of bread are illuminative of the manners by which Pākehā ingredients and methods have been adjusted and refashioned by tangata whenua in uniquely Māori ways. One such example is takakau bread, which was described in 1849 as “large, flat, hard cakes made from a dough that was kneaded, patted into thin rounds and baked on both sides like a pancake” by missionary William Woon after encountering the bread (Petrie, 2006, p. 127). A dish of cooked pastes made from water and flour, often called korikori, is considered to be a continuation of the tradition of Polynesian puddings (Leach, 2010). Another, rēwena, is a bread leavened with a fermented potato starter and likely emerged and became ingrained due to Māori predominantly living rurally, where commercial yeast was difficult to acquire (Veart, 2013). Other flour-based fare such as doughboys (Māori dumplings) and specific forms of steamed pudding have also arisen from the Māori adoption of flour.

Recipes to make bread, as well as other dishes, were disseminated through Māori newspapers by way of the written word – a new medium for transmitting mātauranga. The first newspaper in te reo Māori, *Ko te Karere o Nui Tirenī*, was published in 1842 by the government, and was

followed by numerous national and regional Māori language newspapers that could be government, church and Māori-owned. For example, the periodical *Ko Aotearoa* or the *Maori Recorder*, which carried content in both te reo Māori and English, published instructions in te reo for making rēwena parāoa (starter culture for rēwena bread) and mo te pokepoke parāoa (for the dough itself) in 1862 (see Petrie, 2006, p. 128).

The growing prevalence of direct trade between Maori and Europeans also facilitated the propagation of European material culture. Three-legged iron pots, camp ovens and other utensils and equipment were dispersed among Māori (Cooper, 2024). Camp ovens played a pivotal role in the development of Māori breadmaking. While traditional methods such as hāngi and fermentation were maintained, boiling gained prevalence as a method for everyday cooking and is often attributed, along with the introduction of pork, potatoes, cabbage and flour, as prompting the invention of the now widespread boil up.

### *Beyond European Influence*

The culinary evolution of kai Māori has never been restricted to the ebbs and flows of European influence. This period of growing international connectivity, brought with it a renewal of Māori links with Te Moananui-a-Kiwa, which in turn contributed to the evolution of kai Māori. An early example of this cultural exchange occurred by way of the loads of fresh produce which began arriving in Aotearoa from Rarotonga as a result of Ngāti Whātua leader Pāora Tūhaere's efforts to re-establish relations with the Cook Islands, building on shared whakapapa and culture. In 1863, Tūhaere's ship *Victoria* returned from Rarotonga carrying 43,000 oranges, 200 pounds of arrowroot, and, importantly, 1,000 coconuts (Cutting-Jones, 2023). The visit marked a cultural reconnection between Māori and the Cook Islands, as well as the rest of the Pacific, that persisted through ongoing commercial exchange, migration and intermarriage. The globalisation of food systems and the migration of groups from across various oceans with other culinary traditions has continued to influence and expand definitions of kai Māori (Burgess and Koroi, 2024).

Perhaps the most obvious influence of these renewed relationships upon Māori culinary traditions are the bowls of coconut-filled ika mata or raw fish which are now commonplace in contemporary hākari. Coconuts – abandoned in the voyage to Aotearoa – have been absorbed

back into Māori repertoire by way of raw fish, like the rekindling of a long-lost friendship. This reconnection with the coconut would have likely been prompted by such early commercial exchanges – but also by Pacific migration to Aotearoa in the 20th century. Though there is little literature discussing the histories of raw fish, renditions of the dish exist all across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, and would have accompanied the thousands of Pacific people who relocated to Aotearoa from the 1950s onwards to fill labour shortages, as an edible tie to home (Wright & Hornblow, 2008). Presumably, this is where the coconut-filled form of the dish was adopted into the culinary repertoire of kai Māori.

### *Colonial Dispossession and Disruption*

Alongside these unfamiliar ingredients and cooking methods came the cultural and economic force of colonisation (Petrie, 2006). Settler colonialism, particularly since the 1860s, established the preconditions required for the illegal dispossession of land, resource extraction and removing Māori authority through legislation and cultural assimilation (Coté, 2016). These intertwined processes had devastating ramifications when it came to Māori culture, land and resources (Petrie, 2006) – and thus violently disrupted the complex, collective and interconnected basis of traditional kai Māori which had been built upon centuries of experimentation and cumulative knowledge of the local environment.

The rapid dispossession, confiscation and alienation of land, disconnected Māori from access to traditional food gathering places, natural resources and practices that had sustained them communally for generations (McKerchar et al., 2014). In Waikato, for example, by 1865, 1.2 million acres of land, some of which was used for growing food, was confiscated as part of the raupatu (confiscation) by the Crown. It was the effects of this land alienation that prompted the second Māori king, Kiingi Taawhiao, to establish the Poukai among Waikato people in 1885. This form of resistance through gathering and shared economy, which continues to this day, saw the king pay annual visits to marae affiliated with the Kiingitanga movement in the hope that it would provide for the needs of the poor, the widowed, the orphaned and foster kotahitanga by encouraging people to return to their home marae (Barlow, 1991). Food is a central component to Poukai (originally called Puna-kai, or ‘source of food’) which has given rise to an idiosyncratic, but also ever-evolving culinary tradition that is specific to the gathering. This draws on the freshwater and saltwater delicacies accessible to participating marae (Mahuta &

Schravendijk-Goodman, 2024). A whimsical *whaikōrero* delivered by Koro Dewes in 1970, as cited by Robert Mahuta (1974), recalled that during the reign of Kiingi Taawhiao, jelly was served at Poukai gatherings and was considered to be an exciting novelty despite, perhaps, echoing early forms of jellies derived from *rimurehia* and *tutu* berries. Dewes notes in his “ditty for quivering food” that “[t]he famous food of that time was a quivering food... people came to see and they would desire a penny to go to the Poukai so as to eat this new food” (Mahuta, 1974, pp. 97–98). This recollection highlights how Poukai not only served strictly traditional fare, but also became a site to encounter new and unusual kai.

### *The Commodification of Kai*

Alongside colonialism, which subjugated Māori politically and materially, the imposition of capitalist ideology placed greater demands on land and resources, prompting the decline of more traditional kai practices through environmental degradation and marginalisation of *mahinga kai* (Huambachano, 2018; Hutchings et al., 2012; Moeke-Pickering et al., 2015; Puckey, 2011). Rivers, lakes, harbours, soils and forests that had long been a source of kai were reduced to their commercial potential, contaminated, destroyed and exploited, thus engendering a catastrophic collapse in the availability and accessibility of kai Māori (McKerchar et al., 2014).

The successes of traditional Māori fisheries management, which was ingrained in the fabric of everyday life, had preserved fisheries as a plentiful and varied resource for over one thousand years. However, the application of intensive European fishing methods by settlers meant that by the second half of the 19th century the waters that had once been said to “shimmer with the movement of immense schools of surface fish” (Nepia, 1990, n.p), had subsided to a far less shimmery state. By the end of the 19th century, legislation such as the Oyster Fisheries Act 1866, imposed by the settler government to address the pressure on fisheries meant that Māori were essentially prohibited from the commercial harvesting of *kaimoana*. The Act was the first in a slew of legislation that saw Māori isolated from a resource that had previously been a constant source of sustenance, and separated from an essential expression of *tino rangatiratanga*, guaranteed to Māori in *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (Milroy, 2000).

Another phenomenon that saw Māori separated physically from traditional resources was the process of urbanisation, which surged after the Second World War. Colonial dispossession

pushed Māori communities into cycles of poverty which forced many Māori to leave ancestral lands to find employment in urban centres. Although seasonal migration was common (Pool, 1991), as was migration of taua and heke (Crosby, 2017), permanent shifts in Māori traditional groupings from one place to another were uncommon prior to colonisation, which meant that traditionally geographically situated foods were physical expressions of whakapapa and solidarity (Maughan, 1998). The processes of urbanisation put severe strain on the traditional sociocultural and political units of whānau, hapū and iwi and, as a result, fractured the communal basis of kai (Kingi & Maughan, 2009). As well, adaptation to new lifestyles, particularly those framed by a reliance on wage labour, meant leaving behind traditional diets, practices and traditions in favour of a dependency on external and industrial food sources (Lee-Morgan et al., 2021; Shirley, 2013).

### *Cultural Marginalisation*

The intentional suppression of te reo Māori along with traditional cultural practices and beliefs, in favour of settler language, culture and beliefs, further interrupted Māori relationships with traditional kai. Part of the very nature of the ongoing process of colonisation is to make Indigenous ways of life ‘exotic’ and ‘different’. Said (2001) describes this process with regards to ‘the Orient’, where the colonising group defines themselves as ordinary in contrast to the ‘Other’. In Aotearoa, colonisation recast Māori – our culture, our beliefs, our desires, even our cravings – from being ‘normal’ to the ‘Other’, in our own land (Beaton, 2007).

The eating habits of Māori were positioned in stark contrast to Western ideals of ‘edible’. Not only were Pākehā disinterested in adopting kai Māori, there were some foods and food practices that were considered wholly unacceptable. The traditions of Māori feasting were, for example, deemed “a waste of God's bounty” (Paterson, 2004, p. 171). In some instances specific ingredients themselves, particularly fermented ones, were categorised as disagreeable or unhealthy – sometimes even “putrid” (*Timaru Herald*, 1885, p. 2). It has been theorised that (supposedly) inferior foods may be abandoned by colonised groups (Kalick, 2001) as part of the process of assimilation to colonial norms. However, Māori, who would have been well aware of this stigma, seemingly refused to abandon such ingredients, dishes and practices – potentially due to their embeddedness in long-standing culinary traditions (Beaton, 2007). Or perhaps for the simple reasoning that they are delicious.

An especially charming example of this unwavering pride in kai Māori is found in the contributions of Mrs Keita Kohere (the wife of Ngāti Porou Anglican clergyman Reverend Kohere) to the 1908 book *300 Choice Recipes: Souvenir of all Nations Fair*. Kohere, who is clearly aware of Pākehā distaste for particular ingredients and dishes like kina, pūhā (watercress) and hāngī, takes a futurist approach to such Māori delicacies. She writes that “once prejudice is overcome kina will be found juicy, tasty, and wholesome; a fit dish for epicures” (p. 6), that “when puha becomes popular, it will be like the once despised potato, a national boon” (ibid) and that “it is not too much to hope that some day Hāngi parties will become fashionable” (ibid, p. 11).

### *New Forms of Transmitting Kai Māori*

While historically Māori disseminated knowledge by way of an oral culture, the arrival of European boats on the shores of Aotearoa saw the introduction of written communication. Through the process of colonisation, Māori oral tradition was accompanied and sometimes supplanted by the written word. This recasting challenged existing cultural concepts of knowledge and how it is transferred, however the foundational texts of Māori cookbook literary tradition demonstrates the ways that Māori have embraced new forms of communication to reassert and reshape culinary traditions (Lemon, n.d.).

Cookbooks play a crucial role in the development of a national cuisine (Appadurai, 1998). In Aotearoa, however, a defining feature of cookbook history is the relative absence of Māori recipes. This invisibility reflects a broader pattern in Aotearoa where kai Māori, despite being the Indigenous culinary tradition, is often marginalised by the dominant culture (Morris, 2013). At the same time, this absence may also highlight the persistence of oral transfer grounded in whanaungatanga, through which culinary traditions have traditionally been passed down, even after the arrival of written communication (Beaton, 2007).

The first instance of the inclusion of Māori cookery in a cookbook was in 1908 (Leach, 2010). However, it wasn't until the 1970s Māori renaissance movement that Māori, and specifically wāhine Māori, began publishing their own recipes in printed cookbooks, designed for a Māori audience. Of these, one of the most well-known is the 1982 *Maori Women's Welfare League Inc. Recipe Book*, comprised of recipes that were contributed by wāhine all over the country. These

community cookbooks transformed Māori recipes, not only into fundraising potential, but a celebration and expression of mana motuhake and Māori identity (Leach, 2010). The recipe books of this period also played an essential role in the codification of Māori culinary traditions (Morris, 2013).

The 21st century saw a renewed surge in Māori cookbooks. Coinciding with an ongoing period of Māori cultural renaissance, in the 2000s Māori authors Peter Peeti, Anne Thorp and Charles Royal published cookbooks, each of which redefined Māori cuisine by fusing traditional elements with contemporary culinary styles, techniques and ingredients from Aotearoa and beyond (Morris, 2013). This continued with the 2020 release of Monique Fiso's *Hiakai*, a groundbreaking encyclopedia of Māori ingredients and techniques alongside a collection of innovative and technically complex recipes. And in 2022, Christall Lowe published *Kai*, an eclectic compilation of recipes that span the spectrum from traditional to unconventional: from hāngī, to rhubarb-filled donuts and everything in between.

Beyond this literary tradition, kai Māori has also been transmitted through the television screen by way of reality cooking and competition programmes. Such programming has largely followed the emergence of Māori Television (now called Whakaata Māori) in 2004 which has since broadcast numerous series such as *Kai with Anne Thorp*, *Peter Gordon's Fusion Feasts*, *Hāngi Pit Masters*, *Kai Time on the Road* and *Marae Kai Masters*. These programmes, like the adoption of cookbooks, demonstrate how new modes of media have been utilised by Māori to communicate an evolving culinary tradition.

In her 2007 analysis of Māori cuisine, Beaton observed that Māori cookbooks established kai Māori as a continuous and evolving tradition. Recipes often blended European methods and ingredients with pre-Pākehā Māori methods and ingredients, with very few recipes using both traditional foods and traditional methods. Māori were not passive recipients of culinary change, but rather actively selected which novel European foods and methods to adopt and which traditional foods to discard. Pākehā ingredients and technologies were swallowed into the Māori culinary tradition and reinterpreted “in a Maori way” (Beaton, 2007, p. 62). Many of these adaptations retained ties to pre-colonial practices – particularly in relation to preservation, Polynesian pudding and fermentation. This, Beaton writes, demonstrates “that an Indigenous

people such as Maori can in fact absorb outside influences whilst still retaining an inherently Maori culinary tradition” (Beaton, 2007, p. ii).

Beyond material ingredients, dishes and techniques, the distinctiveness of kai Māori also lies in the continuation of culturally transmitted rules. Beaton (2007) likens these rules to tikanga related to kai – guidelines that govern every stage of kai from gathering and preparation, to serving and consumption. Mead (2013, pp. 3–4) defines tikanga as “a set of beliefs and practices associated with procedures to be followed in conducting the affairs of a group or an individual,” established over time, validated across generations and responsive to changing circumstances. The word tika means ‘right’, indicating that within the context of kai Māori, tikanga refers to the correct or customary practices, values and beliefs passed down intergenerationally. While the principles of tikanga are deeply rooted, they are not fixed (Metge, 2014).

## **2.4 The Contemporary Kai Māori Landscape**

Māori are a colonised people and the impacts of colonisation outlined in the previous section – including, but not limited to land alienation, assimilation, urbanisation and environmental degradation – continue to reverberate, greatly impacting Māori structures, values, and ways of knowing and being (Kawharu, 1995; Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019). As well, ongoing breaches of the nation’s founding document Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which reaffirms tino rangatiratanga and which promised protection, equal citizenship, and recognition of taonga, have also profoundly disrupted Māori relationships with cultural identity. These disruptions to Māori identity more broadly have come with disruptions to our connections with culinary traditions.

Like other strands of te ao Māori, culinary traditions have been marginalised by settler colonialism. The combined effects of land alienation, urbanisation, and environmental degradation – driven by colonialism and capitalism – have made it increasingly difficult, and often impossible, to gather kai through traditional practices. Access to the physical, social and spiritual dimensions of kai Māori was further fragmented through policy such as the Native Schools Act 1858, the Suppression of Rebellion Act 1863, the Native Reserves Act 1864, the Native Lands Act 1865, the Māori Representation Act 1867 and the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907. More recently, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in State Care and in the Care of Faith-based Institutions revealed that the placement of young Māori into state care,

away from their whānau and kāinga, severed vital systems of physical, emotional, and spiritual support – ultimately disconnecting them from their identity as Māori (Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2021).

As the globalised, industrial food system – driven by a logic of growth and profit – has expanded, it has increasingly displaced and distorted traditional kai knowledge and preferences. In some cases even our taste buds have been metaphorically colonised (Hutchings and Smith, 2025). Systemic inequality further compounds this issue, with many Māori disproportionately affected by poverty and struggling to put any food on the table, let alone traditional kai (Glasse et al., 2023). Being deprived of adequate food not only impacts health and well being but also undermines the expression of cultural identity (Beavis et al., 2019; McKerchar et al., 2014; Wiremu et al., 2022).

### *Reclaiming Kai Māori*

This era also represents a vibrant period of kai Māori reclamation. Despite the persistent reverberation of oppression and ongoing injustice, Māori culture and identity endures (O’Carroll, 2013c). Events like Te Matatini and the establishment of Matariki as a public holiday have helped to enliven engagement with te ao Māori, not only among Māori, but also the wider population.

Since the election of the Sixth National Government in 2023, Māori–Crown relations have been especially fraught. The coalition government’s policies – including perhaps most pernicious of all, a promise by National to support Act’s Treaty Principles Bill to select committee – have drawn criticism for undermining Māori rights. Yet these challenges have also galvanised resistance. Māori, alongside many non-Māori, have participated in nationwide hikoi and other forms of protest. One especially notable occurrence within this tide of opposition was a historic national gathering called by Kiingi Tuheitia at Tuurangawaewae Marae in January 2023, where over 10,000 people gathered in a demonstration of kotahitanga. In a much quoted address at the gathering, Kiingi Tuheitia, urged, “The best practice we can do right now is be Maaori – Maaori all day every day” – a call to live cultural identity through everyday life (Muru-Lanning, 2024).

This distinct political and cultural moment has coincided with a growing resurgence of cultural reclamation, including that of kai Māori. Māori are seeking out ways to reinvigorate connections

with te ao Māori and in many cases are doing so by decolonising or ‘re-indigenising’ their plate (Smith and Hutchings, 2024). This renewed interest has corresponded with an increase in Māori cookbooks and the growing presence of indigenous ingredients and techniques in the country’s restaurant landscape (Morris, 2013).

Social media platforms have also become important spaces where kai Māori is shared and celebrated. The shift to a digitally mediated world – where knowledge is transmitted through platforms such as Facebook – blends elements of written, oral and visual communication. For Māori, this evolution in communication has created new potential for learning, engaging with, and sharing cultural knowledge. At the same time, these technologies introduce new challenges regarding the control over such knowledge and the impacts on the traditional social structures through which such knowledge would typically be disseminated (Sciascia, 2016). Within this context, the Facebook groups considered by this study represent a contemporary development in the progression of the transmission of kai Māori, preceded by the emergence of the first written Māori recipes and the oral transmission of mātauranga.

A key development in the growing movement to re-indigenising our plates is the burgeoning movement for Māori kai sovereignty (Hutchings, 2015; Morris & Fitzherbert, 2016; Stein et al., 2017; Shirley, 2013; Wehi et al., 2023). This aligns with the global concept of food sovereignty, defined in the Nyéléni Declaration (2007, p. 1) as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”.

At its core, the pursuit of kai sovereignty is rooted in an understanding that food systems are fundamental to Māori spiritual and cultural identity, and a key means of enacting tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake. It challenges colonial practices which have undermined Māori sovereign rights over food systems (Moeke-Pickering et al., 2015), while responding to urgent issues like climate change and food insecurity. It strives to do so through regaining governance over food systems (Hutchings & Smith, 2025).

Scholars highlight how kai sovereignty encourages the revival of traditional kai practices, deepens nutrition and health knowledge, and restores wellbeing (Moeke-Pickering et al., 2015). But it also goes further – situated in a worldview where human and natural realms are deeply interconnected, kai sovereignty extends beyond solely focusing on human health to include the

wellbeing of the ecosystems which kai emanates from (Kawharu & Tapsell, 2019; Taiapa & Moewaka Barnes, 2023) and considering our relationship with past and future generations (Burgess & Koroi, 2024). As Hutchings and Smith (2025, p. 27) note, kai sovereignty means feeding Māori communities while simultaneously protecting the “sovereign capacities of the natural world” – from plants, to animals, to insects, to microbes. This movement is being driven by whānau, hapū, iwi and wider communities who are reviving ancestral practices, rituals and mātauranga, sharing this knowledge across generations and through social media.

Māori-led environmental and land protest movements are also expressions of kai sovereignty in action. The occupation of Ihumātao which began in July 2019, for instance, highlighted the inseparable link between land and kai. Indeed, the protest movement highlighted the importance of land in achieving Māori social and political aspirations – including kai sovereignty. The occupation explicitly foregrounded kai sovereignty too, drawing on the land’s rich kai history as a place which supported the cultivation of bountiful fruit, vegetables and wheat before being confiscated in 1867 by the New Zealand government. During the occupation, kai itself – often supplied through koha and served from a makeshift wharekai set up at the site – played a vital role in nourishing the crowds, the occupation and a sense of manaakitanga (Muru-Lanning, 2019).

**Figure 3** *Makeshift Wharekai Tent and Crates of Home-Baked Fare at the Occupation of Ihumātao*





*Note.* Photographs by Nahyeon Lee, 2019.

### *Discourses of Absence*

Despite the growing visibility of kai Māori, contemporary discourse around Māori culinary traditions is still marked by absence. For example, the limited lack of mainstream familiarity toward Māori bread, like rēwena, despite the widespread popularity of similar foreign breads, has been repeatedly discussed (Muru-Lanning, 2023a, 2023b; Neill and Sturny, 2022; Patel, 2022).

Others have examined the dearth of Māori restaurants. Drawing on Appadurai's (1990) concept of 'scape', Morris (2010) surveyed what she described as Aotearoa's 'culinascape' through the lens of race relations. She attributed the lack of Māori restaurants to a combination of limited clientele, economic barriers and the existence of alternative communal gathering spaces for Māori, beyond the restaurant. Building upon the theoretical positions of Hage (2012), Harbottle (2000), and Heldke (2003), Morris (2010, p. 8) contended that food's edibility is socially constructed, therefore suggesting that kai Māori was seen as unacceptable to Pākehā due to the "spoilt identity" of Māori – reflective of Māori political activism that "challenge[d] Pākehā cultural and political dominance" (Morris, 2010, p. 7).

Building on this, Neill et al. (2015) investigated how the politics of edibility shapes Māori

acceptance in Aotearoa. The authors argued that the undervaluing of Māori food is demonstrative of “Māori’s subordinate position to Pākehā” and proposed a theoretical framework “designed to enhance the reputation of Māori food within the culinascape” and with it, “the state of race relations in Aotearoa New Zealand” (p. 98-99).

Amid changing times, traditional spaces like marae endure, not only as vital sites for the preservation of kai Māori customs and traditions, but also as spaces where this culinary tradition continues to evolve. Today, the spreads found on the tables of marae wharekai often include an eclectic mix of traditional and adopted dishes – reflecting a living, adaptive culinary tradition shaped by both pre- and post-colonial influences.

This dynamic tradition was evident during the 2024 tangihanga of Kiingi Tuheitia, which culminated in the coronation of his daughter, Nga wai hono i te po as the new monarch of the Kiingitanga. Throughout the week, hundreds of ringawera worked tirelessly, dawn to dusk – peeling, chopping, cooking and serving kai to tens of thousands – an extraordinary expression of manaakitanga and kotahitanga.

**Figure 4** *A Plate of Kai at the Hākari at Kiingi Tuheitia’s Tangihanga*



*Note.* Photograph by author, 2024.

Such efforts highlight the essential role of ringawera in the continuity of kai traditions. Their time and labour – almost always given voluntarily – form the backbone of contemporary expressions of manaakitanga. A plate of kai from the hākari (fig. 4), featuring hāngī, kūmara, fry bread, pipi, toroi, an oyster, raw fish, a Japanese-inspired coleslaw and crayfish exemplifies how kai Māori today continues to embody the layered history of ancestral traditions while embracing contemporary tastes and influences.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated that kai has had an ongoing cultural significance to Māori as a link to an intertwined sense of place, spirituality and whakapapa. It has also always evolved. Prior to colonisation, traditional Māori kai systems were sustainable, complex, interconnected and maintained well-being. However, the violent processes of colonisation and capitalism radically

altered Māori kai systems and kai sovereignty.

In many instances Māori readily adopted new ingredients and cooking techniques from Pākehā, along with other global influences. Traditional ingredients, methods and tikanga associated with foods were held on to and combined with new ingredients, cooking styles and ways of eating. In other cases, Māori were forcibly assimilated to a Western capitalist food system, which has led to disproportionate levels of food insecurity between Māori and non-Māori.

Despite such challenges the kai Māori culinary tradition has persisted and continues to evolve. The communication and transfer of knowledge around food practices has evolved alongside these shifts, from an oral tradition, to written, to digital forms. Just as the form kai Māori takes today is intimately tied to its history, these various phases of communication each remain relevant today.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter sets out the methodological approach taken by this study, including my researcher positioning, the theoretical lens applied, the unique ethical considerations involved in using social media data and methods of data selection and analysis.

Researching online communities presents complex methodological and ethical questions (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Online communities are fundamentally different to offline communities in that they are not bound by the same spatial and temporal boundaries. This creates unique conditions for research and new ways to access research participants and data. The ethical aspects of online research are particularly challenging, this chapter thus pays close attention to questions of informed consent and researcher anonymity.

### **3.2 Methodological Approach**

Aboriginal social scientist Maggie Walter (2019, p. 13) defines methodology as “the worldview lens through which the research question and the core concepts are translated into the research approach we take”. This includes our sociocultural position, how we define and prioritise knowledge, belief and value system, how we perceive the world around us, our chosen theoretical approach and research method.

My interest in kai Māori is shaped by my identity as a wahine Māori who was raised in Tāmaki Makaurau. It is a desire for connection which initially drew me to these kai Māori Facebook groups and that ultimately motivated this research focus. Living in this in-between space has moulded my understanding of kai Māori as evolving, dynamic and nuanced. It is not fixed, but alive – forever adapting to our changing contexts.

Ontologically, this study is framed by an understanding of kai as whakapapa. By this I mean that kai itself can be understood as part of a genealogical web of whakapapa – as whanaunga. Within this interpretation, the definition of kai Māori is not just the sum of canonical dishes like boil up and hāngī or ingredients like kūmara and kina, it is, instead, complex, interconnected and relational. The way we eat connects us to ngā atua, te taiao, our tūpuna, communities, ourselves,

our pasts, present and future. This understanding carries with it a responsibility, that is, to engage with kai in ways that nurture good connections. In the context of this research, it also means adopting methodologies that uphold those relational responsibilities.

### **3.3 The Ethics of Researching Online Communities**

The rising social significance of Facebook has been accompanied by a growing body of academic research conducted on the social media platform (Wilson et al., 2012). Social scientists have recognised the enormous potential of Facebook as a tool for research (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Kozinets, 2015). Because of the unique affordances and limitations of Facebook compared to other sites of research, conducting research in this novel digital space often requires adaptation of research methods used in more traditional settings.

Research conducted within these online sites can pose new contextual challenges, both practical and ethical. Townsend and Wallace (2017) identify four key areas of ethical concern when conducting research using social media data: whether the data should be considered public or private; informed consent; anonymity and risk of harm. Noting that, even members of public Facebook groups do not anticipate becoming research subjects and the boundaries between private and public Facebook data can be unclear. In any case, the authors underscore the importance of maintaining the safety and anonymity of individuals.

The extent to which these core areas of concern are recognised in social media research, let alone actively addressed, varies considerably. A review of 23 studies conducting qualitative health research using data obtained from Facebook users found major inconsistencies in terms of ethical approaches (Lathan et al., 2023). Most studies in the review lacked detailed descriptions of their methods involving the extraction, use and storage of Facebook data. The authors also noted the lack of practical guidelines to assist researchers interested in conducting qualitative studies using data derived from Facebook. A separate systematic review of social media-based public health research by Lathan et al. (2023) found that only 10% of the studies that they reviewed sought and obtained informed consent from Facebook users. Qualitative studies of Facebook groups, identified as relevant to this research (Inserra, 2018; Nguyen, 2023), were vague in terms of describing how units of data were accessed, extracted, saved, stored and/or organised. This has

underscored, for me, the importance of being transparent and explicit about my methods of data selection, extraction and use.

There is debate around whether informed consent is ethically necessary when gathering online content for analysis (Murthy, 2008; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010; Ulrike & Panayiotis, 2010; Schrum, 1995), particularly given the blurred boundaries of what is public or private within online spaces. However, there is no clear precedent, nor are there well-established guidelines. Schrum (1995, pp. 323–4), for example, advocates for engagement and transparency in order to make communities aware of the presence of the researcher, and for researchers to view themselves as having an ‘obligation’ to the electronic communities they are researching. On the other hand, some propose that the popular understanding of the internet as a public domain makes this unnecessary (Pfeil and Zaphiris, 2010). Regardless of which side of the debate a researcher finds themselves on, Murthy (2008) reminds them of their responsibilities to the communities they research. As digital contexts often include intimate and personal content unlikely to be revealed in person, Murthy reiterates the ethical accountability necessary in digital research, especially when such content is shared by vulnerable or marginalised communities.

### **3.4 Māori Data Sovereignty**

What might a tikanga-led approach to using data from Māori Facebook users for research purposes look like? In the absence of a clear set of guidelines, guidance can be found in the well-known MDSov principles developed by the Māori Data Sovereignty Network Te Mana Raraunga (2018). Māori data sovereignty, and its global counterpart Indigenous data sovereignty (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016), is a research field, site of activism, and extension of more substantive forms of hapū and iwi mana motuhake (Kukutai & Cormack, 2020).

The tikanga-based MDSov principles provide a high-level roadmap for the ethical use of Māori data to “enhance the wellbeing of our people, language and culture” and form a critical touchstone for considering the ethics of researching online Māori communities. The principles are tikanga based, comprising rangatiratanga, whakapapa, whanaungatanga, kotahitanga, manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga. Below are the specific principles that have strong resonance with this study and that I have tried to uphold.

*3.2 (Whanaungatanga / Obligations) Accountabilities. Individuals and organisations responsible for the creation, collection, analysis, management, access, security or dissemination of Māori data are accountable to the communities, groups and individuals from whom the data derive.*

In this research, I felt a strong sense of accountability to uphold the mana of group members and the data they shared within the groups. This was deeply influenced by my conceptualisation of kai as whakapapa.

*5.1 (Manaakitanga / Reciprocity) Respect. The collection, use and interpretation of data shall uphold the dignity of Māori communities, groups and individuals. Data analysis that stigmatises or blames Māori can result in collective and individual harm and should be actively avoided.*

This principle has been a foundational guide throughout this research. It oriented my approach to the data, particularly in ensuring that the content shared within these online groups was not interpreted or presented through a deficit lens, nor in ways that could potentially cause harm to individuals or these online communities.

*5.2 (Manaakitanga / Reciprocity). Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) shall underpin the collection and use of all data from or about Māori. Less-defined types of consent shall be balanced by stronger governance arrangements.*

Free, prior and informed consent is a core concept in Indigenous rights discourse (UNDRIP) and highly significant within Māori research. While acknowledging that I was unable to fully uphold this principle because of the methodological choice to adopt a form of digital ‘lurking’, which is discussed in detail later in this chapter, I have sought consent when using direct quotes or photographs that might lead to group members being identified.

In considering my relational responsibilities, one of the most significant ethical challenges in this study stemmed from my decision to not announce my researcher role to the online communities while collecting textual data. The methodological approach of covert observation in online spaces is commonly known as ‘lurking’ (Gelinas et al., 2017). The question of lurking, sometimes termed ‘cyberstealth’ (Ebo, 1998, p. 3), arises because social media lends itself to researcher anonymity. Ethnographers within a virtual space are able to assume a cloak of anonymity in order to observe and gather data without alerting individuals to their presence as researchers (Murthy, 2008). This anonymity creates research opportunities as well as ethical questions for the researcher that are considered in more detail below.

### *Lurking*

Given the openness of the groups considered in this study, it is possible for the researcher to view and extract data or ‘lurk’ among online communities without gaining prior consent from participants. (Bechmann, 2014). There is broad agreement that “the act of lurking and its implications” must be considered in online research (Richman, 2007, p. 183). As such, this section includes a detailed discussion on the ethics of lurking, particularly within Māori online spaces. This is to justify the approach taken by this study, illustrate the mitigations put in place to protect members of the online communities and to consider these questions through a Māori data sovereignty research lens.

Māori researchers have reflected on the compatibility of lurking with Kaupapa Māori ethics. Green, contemplating Māori Instagram research, surmises that, through the lens of Kaupapa Māori methodologies, lurking could be considered to be at odds with principles of manaakitanga, openness and reciprocity (Bishop, 1998; Henry & Pene, 2001; Smith, 2012; Walker et al., 2006). Similarly, Waitoa et al. (2015), in a study of political engagement on the Mana Party’s Facebook sites, addressed the existing debate around the ethics of informed consent in internet-based research informed by Kaupapa Māori research principles. In this case, an invitation to participate in the study was posted to the page central to the study and moderators of the pages were contacted, “giving people the opportunity to think about the research and voluntarily come forward to participate if they wished” (Waitoa et al., 2015, p. 50).

While previous research has suggested that lurking may be inconsistent with Kaupapa Māori research, discourse remains limited. The present study perhaps complicates such evaluations as it intentionally uses anonymity as a research tool. Nevertheless, this choice requires ethical justification.

The ethics of lurking in the broader sphere of academic enquiry remain debated. Despite inherent ethical risks that accompany covert online research, many scholars have established that it is possible to lurk while maintaining responsible research ethics. Willis (2017) contends that contextualised, flexible approaches to online research ethics are necessary. Accordingly, if data is public and if the data is textual it may be justifiable to waive informed consent particularly if users view their content as public. Kosinski et al. (2015, p. 553) liken public data mining to

archival research; “a method frequently employed in disciplines such as history, art criticism, and literature, which rarely involve rules for the protection of human subjects”. They propose that the use of public Facebook data should not require participants’ consent so long as it is reasonable to assume that data was knowingly made public by individuals, data is anonymised, there is no communication with the individual and no information that can be ascribed to an individual is published. While they contribute to this contextualised approach to the ethics of lurking, the authors reiterate that availability does not equate to unrestricted use.

Taking heed of Willis (2017) and Kosinski et al. (2015), this thesis finds that there are instances whereby forgoing informed consent is justified, provided that the research at hand remains ethically accountable and responsible. Research of online communities must balance the richness and usefulness of collecting data while protecting the interests of the researched community. There are a number of reasons for taking this approach, as well as several mitigations that have been put in place to minimise the risk of harm. This section considers those in turn.

First, as outlined above, Facebook groups can be considered public spaces – even if social media users may not entirely understand what can and cannot be publicly viewed on social media platforms, or what happens to their data once posted on these sites (Bechmann, 2014; Gelinas et al., 2017; Karanicolas, 2021; Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Willis, 2017). While one of the two Facebook groups studied is technically ‘closed’, meaning that an individual has to belong to a group to access content, following Gajaria et al. (2011), it can still be considered a public space where users have a limited expectation of privacy. This condition is satisfied, for example, in instances where data is collected from communities with large membership, or that have minimal entry barriers – such as in Autio (2018, p. 2) where research groups were “considered public in the sense that when membership is required it appears to be for purposes of keeping fake accounts out. Membership as such is available to anyone”.

The two online communities selected for this study have large numbers of members and limited access restrictions – perhaps more akin to a bustling street than a restaurant or *whare kai*, where there is less assumption of privacy (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). While members agree to a set of basic rules of the group before they are allowed entry, there is no other barrier to entry. By this

measure there is already a high level of openness to this data which is for all intents and purposes, publicly accessible.

The second reason that permission was not sought to observe these communities is epistemological. There is a high chance that announcing the presence of a researcher, or the act of seeking permission from page moderators and/or administrators, could distort the data and potentially interrupt the group dynamics. Such an ‘observer effect’ could undermine the purpose of the research – a concern also raised by Nguyen (2023) in a study of a Vietnamese food group on Facebook. Nguyen (p. 324) writes, “I did not want to disrupt the ways members posted their content and interacted with others”.

Furthermore, seeking consent from all members of these Facebook groups was deemed virtually impossible. Another consideration made was the risk of introducing unnecessary social friction within these communities. The possibility of seeking permission from the moderators of groups was considered, but it was determined that this might burden a Facebook moderator (a recreational and voluntary position rather than a professional role) with having to make an ethical decision on the behalf of hundreds of thousands of group members with whom they do not necessarily have any formal relationship.

#### *Lurking Ethically in this Study*

This research contends that lurking can co-exist within ethical methodological practices and, more importantly, the MDSov principles. As described earlier, there are epistemological rationales for not seeking prior consent, especially given the large, open nature of the Facebook groups studied – spaces that can be seen as public.

Contextually, the risks of forgoing informed consent are mitigated by the observational nature of the research, which focuses on everyday, non-sensitive, textual and visual content, rather than obviously sensitive information, nor does this study collect demographic or personal information. Therefore, the appropriateness of this approach would likely need to be reconsidered if the groups in question revolved around more sensitive subjects such as political views or health.

This aligns itself with the collective kaupapa of these groups. It could be argued that these groups are asking similar questions to this research, that is: “what are we eating today?” Drawing on Renall and Te Morenga (2024) and the tikanga-based MDSov principles, I was cognisant to avoid data that framed kai Māori in deficit terms or that was exploitative.

Measures were taken to protect participants from any potential harm. The anonymity and confidentiality of community members were safeguarded as findings were largely reported as general characterisations. Where consent wasn't obtained, quotes were paraphrased to prevent traceability, following Bond et al. (2013), and marked with an asterisk. In instances where I wanted to use a direct written quote or reproduce an image from a post, I contacted group members to seek their consent. As recommended by Eysenbach and Till (2001), in instances where specific photographs or verbatim written quotes are reproduced within this thesis, written consent was obtained from the group member who shared the content. In all cases, group members' names are removed and content revealing any potentially sensitive information to the individual or collective (e.g. photographs of children or comments specifically locating kai gathering sites) are not reproduced. These protective measures are essential in balancing the risks of 'lurking'.

This approach contrasts sharply with other instances of research within online communities, such as a study described in Latham et al. (2023), where “a screenshot of a user's full name and profile photo was included with a post about losing a parent to breast cancer” in a study that was published without IRB approval. The authors were able to locate the user's profile in less than 10 minutes.

In contrast, this thesis adopts a higher ethical standard than the majority of the studies cited in Latham et al (2023), and arguably, within a far less sensitive area of research. This higher standard, however, recognises that ethical consideration is of vital importance due to the nature of the topic, which focuses on Māori identity and communities.

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from The University of Waikato ALPPS Human Research Ethics Committee (FS2024-12). The ethical review process largely focused on how the research would attend to the ethical complexities of forgoing explicit consent from

members of the Facebook groups. Careful considerations of data privacy are vital in upholding ethical and trustworthy data ecosystems.

### **3.5 The Facebook Groups Included in this Study**

#### *Group selection*

Ahead of collecting data, twenty Facebook groups were identified as having a specific focus on both food and, to varying degrees, Māori identity. These were found using combinations of the search terms: “kai”, “Māori” and “food”. There is diversity and flexibility around what might constitute a kai Māori Facebook group, especially considering the interconnected nature of Māori conceptions of kai, so this study adopted an inclusive approach. Any groups where users predominantly posted food-related content and which, in the researcher’s subjective view, expressed an overtly Māori identity through their name, description, entry questions or shared content were considered to fit this definition. It was recorded throughout this selection process that none of these groups explicitly mentioned whakapapa Māori as a necessary condition of membership or entry and this study has not collected any demographic (including ethnicity) information on group members.

It should be noted that there are three general levels of privacy surrounding Facebook groups. The most open being ‘public’, which means anyone can see the group, its members and their content. A ‘private’ group means that only members can see who belongs to the group and their content and ‘secret’ groups are accessible by invitation only.

Among numerous Facebook groups which fit into this general category, two groups were selected for data collection because of their specific subject focus, large membership and high engagement. Both of these groups had the highest group population and rates of group engagement respectively. Kai Maori had a population of 174,900 and 390 monthly posts at the point in time that page selections were made, while KAI Basket NZ had a population of 158,700 and 1,242 monthly posts. In line with Kozinets (2015), these groups were chosen for their relevance, activity, interactivity, size, diversity and data richness.

During the initial stages of this research, a number of global Indigenous food-focused Facebook groups were also identified (limited to pages searchable in the English language). Some of these

groups, Bush Tucker & Sea Food, a group centred on “Indigenous Australians sharing their love of bush tucker and sea food from all parts of Australia” where membership was restricted to Indigenous Australians, imposed stricter criteria for entry compared to the groups at the centre of this study.

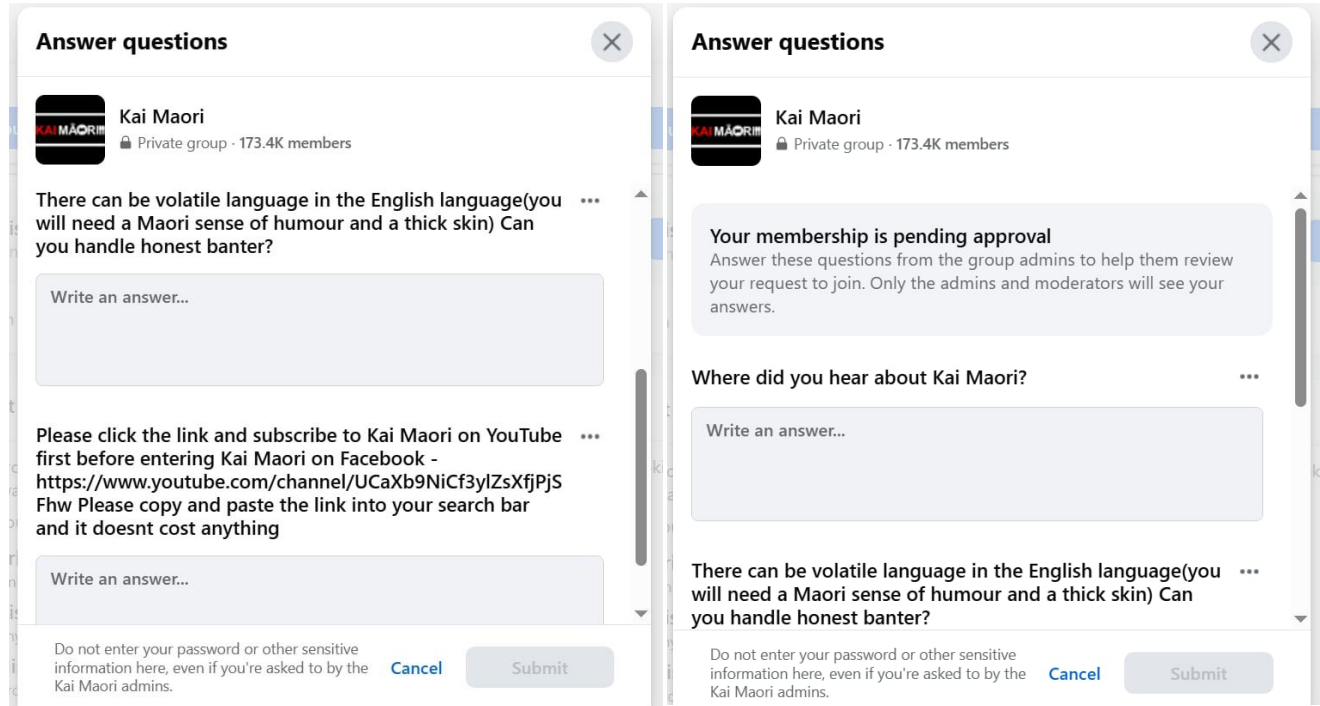
Other groups did not restrict access but were more prescriptive around the kinds of food-related content permitted. The USA-based First Nations Traditional Foods And Harvesters Facebook group, for instance, specifies its focus on “traditional” foods in the description and instructs members to “Share pictures and or stories of traditional harvesting on and around our lands”. Another example is Mama’s Palestinian Kitchen, a diverse community of Palestinians living in the Palestinian territories of Gaza and West Bank and internationally, along with non-Palestinians, whose unifying characteristic is that they “love Palestine and its rich ethnic food! 🇵🇸”.

While not included within this study’s analysis, these groups highlight the broader landscape of how Indigenous communities engage with and share food culture online. They also offer insight into differing group entry criteria and content guidelines, in contrast to the more open and flexible Māori-focused groups at the focus of this research.

#### *Group #1: Kai Maori*

The Facebook group Kai Maori was launched in January 2013, making it the oldest kai Māori Facebook group of those identified by this study. The group has since grown to 174,900 members, making it the most populous group of those considered as well. The group has 11 admins and only members can see who is in the group and what they post. In order to join the group, Facebook users are asked to respond to three non-restrictive questions (fig.5).

**Figure 5** Kai Maori Facebook Group Membership Request Questions



*Note.* Screenshots taken by author on 14 June, 2025.

Although this is a “closed” Facebook group – meaning prospective members must answer a set of questions to join – this does not necessarily imply a high expectation of privacy. The group itself can be found by anyone with a Facebook account, has a large membership and the entry questions are general enough that they are unlikely to pose a barrier to entry, and instead seem to exist primarily to deter fake accounts and to encourage subscriptions to the group’s YouTube offshoot account. The group is not centred around shared traits (such as political views, sexuality or health) nor is the group limited to individuals who whakapapa Māori.

In the group description, members are specifically invited to post images of their favourite kai Māori, along with recipes. And new members are asked to introduce themselves to the group with a photo or “kōrero”. The group is described as a place “created for those people who love Kai Maori and have a unique way of cooking their way, your style”. A lengthy set of rules are listed too, to guide the behaviour within the space: no links, no sharing from other pages, no

hashtags, no GIFs, no swearing, no watch parties, no videos longer than 30 minutes. Posts advertising goods or services must be paid for. Posts should include kai cooked at home – “anything else will be removed”. Much of the description emphasises that group members keep negative comments to themselves and “respect each [other]”, as the quote below conveys:

I don't like to moan so I will say this once...the food on this page is for your enjoyment and others enjoyment. If there is Kai you think you don't like...do yourself a favour and all of us on here a favour and kei te haere scroll past simple really, then you won't get deleted.

#### *Group #2: KAI Basket NZ*

The second group observed for this study, KAI Basket NZ, was launched on 16 January 2021. It has since become the second largest kai Māori Facebook group, with 158,700 members. This group also showed the highest level of engagement among those identified, with 1,242 member posts in the month group selections were made. The group has 11 admins and one moderator. Unlike the Kai Maori Facebook group, there are no entry questions, and the group is entirely open, meaning that anyone with a Facebook account can view members and posts

The group description begins with an enthusiastic welcome: “Kia ora everyone and welcome aboard our family whanau friendly KAI Basket NZ”. It then goes on to characterise the group as a community of whānau and friends focused on showcasing “our great kai to the world”. A flexible definition to “our great kai” is given, and includes “Mexican Italian Greek Pacific Island Maori Asian or your everyday kai”. Members are encouraged to behave respectfully, with a ban on “foul language”. The impetus for the creation of the page seems to have been the closure of New Zealand’s borders during the Covid-19 pandemic and they note their weekly “happy hour” on the page designed “to allow members to engage with their love of kai [with] alcohol with whanau overseas”.

#### *Similarities and Differences Between the Groups*

In the early stages of this research, casual observation of the postings, description section and other page information of two Facebook groups identified both as allowing for flexibility in the kinds of food content posted. Each group also institutes relatively informal and inclusive

approaches to membership, where whakapapa Māori is not a requirement. Nevertheless, the selection process for the two pages has also taken into account the distinctiveness of each group.

While the Kai Maori group does not specify that members post food which fits neatly into historically established repertoire of kai Māori, it still explicitly centres Māori identity. This is indicated in the name of the group, Kai Maori, which provides a clear framing for the page. As well as this, the group description specifically mentions the concept of kai Māori – “Post your favourite Kai Maori on this page, for all you Maori kai food lovers out there” – and te reo Māori phrases are interspersed within this section too.

In contrast, KAI Basket NZ defines itself more loosely, with a generalised approach to the type of food posted by members. The description section encourages members to post a broad range of food, including, but not limited to kai Māori. Unlike the Kai Maori Facebook group, KAI Basket NZ’s name is not necessarily as exclusively tethered to Māori identity. The inclusion of “NZ” has strong associations with New Zealand national identity and although the word kai is te reo Māori, it has been adopted into mainstream New Zealand vernacular or slang used by Māori and non-Māori alike. There is little that indicates an explicit and exclusive link to Māori identity in the description of the group, however, it still aligns with this study’s criteria whereby food and Māori identity are central to the character of the group. The posts and interactions within the group overwhelmingly express an implicit “Māori-ness”, detectable through elements like the frequent use of te reo Māori and mentions of specifically Māori experiences and values.

In the subsequent analysis chapters, I did not distinguish or make comparisons between the two groups as the data variances were not considered substantial enough to complicate the analysis. However, exploring these differences could be a valuable direction for future research.

### **3.6 Data Collection**

All of the data included in this study is secondary data – that is, it is not data generated or collected (in the traditional sense) by the researcher. Two main methods were used to gather data from the two Kai Māori Facebook groups; first, an extended period of informal observation and data collection, second, a more structured, short-term collection process. This section outlines both approaches and the rationale behind them.

I began by casually observing the groups twelve months ahead of the formal data collection to become immersed and familiar with the culture and dynamics of the group, as suggested by Altheide (1987, 1996). Within these digital spaces members can post content such as photographs, links, videos, questions, events, documents, as well as responses.

1. *Posts*: A post is created by a Facebook user and can involve text, image, video, live content, polls and linked content. Within a group, posts appear on the main ‘discussion’ feed of the community and also on members’ individual newsfeeds.
2. *Comments*: A comment is a response to either a post or another comment. These typically involve text, but can also include image, video, emojis, GIFs and digital ‘stickers’.
3. *Reactions*: A reaction is a response to a post or comment whereby a user selects one of a selection of emoticons (Like, Love, Care, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry) which express their feelings toward the content.

A sample of everyday data, including posts, comments, images, video and reactions, was manually collected from the two selected Facebook groups: Kai Maori and KAI Basket NZ. Field notes were anonymised. In cases where it was necessary to request consent for the use of quotes, the group search function was used to identify and contact the relevant group member.

The first phase of this study was an informal observational data collection which took place over the course of 2024. Across these twelve months, posts deemed to be of particular relevance to the research questions, and especially those that generated a large amount of dialogue, were collected and later analysed. These selections were also informed by the literature review and helped address limitations of the month-long, formal analysis which may have otherwise missed seasonal variance which is especially pronounced in the context of food.

**Table 1** *Collected Posts From Kai Māori Facebook Groups in this Study*

	<b>KAI Basket NZ</b>	<b>Kai Maori</b>
Posts collected over 12-month period of casual observation	73	42
Total postings made during the one-month collection period	1,067	226
Excluded from collection (under engagement threshold)	815	145
Collected (of or above engagement threshold)	252	81
Final data set across both collection periods	325	123

The second component of this study was a formal data collection over a month-long period (between 10 December 2024 and 10 January 2025). Following Autio (2018), to manage the volume of content, only the posts with high amounts of engagement were included, determined by the number of reactions on posts. Only posts with reactions numbering above a certain threshold were added to the data set. To account for the variance in activity across each group, different thresholds were set for each group; Kai Maori, which had less activity had a lower threshold (25 reactions and over), while KAI Basket NZ's was higher (56 reactions and over). Posts which were clearly for the purpose of advertising were excluded from the collected data set.

This method captured a dense sample of posts over a short time and complemented the longer-term casual observation. As mentioned earlier, the limitation of this sample is that it is reflective

of a fixed time frame, where seasonal or cultural idiosyncrasies are likely to be missed, while others are likely to be enhanced. For example, the second part of this study's collection period took place through the Christmas period, and also during the lead up to the closing date for public submissions on the contentious Principles Treaty of Waitangi Bill, which was a particularly intense time for Māori online. However, this sample of posts helped to reduce potential selection bias and revealed patterns otherwise not apparent. Together, these two methods offered a comprehensive view of these communities while also maintaining a rigorous approach.

### **3.7 Technological Limitations of Collecting Data on Facebook**

The groups focused on in this study contain an abundance of rich social data – photographs, videos, recipes, commentary, dialogue and so on. All of this is theoretically accessible to researchers by way of a few clicks. However, while data on this site might seem highly accessible, this study has found major obstacles to the systematic collection of it.

First, the architecture of Facebook's interface makes organising data difficult. On Facebook, as with other social media, "people easily can communicate and publish whatever they like. As a result, people are able to create huge amounts of data" (Abbasi & Liu, 2013, p. 441). While Facebook groups include a search function which can help refine a cumbersome data set, this only indexes words mentioned within posts, not multimedia (like image or video) or metadata like location or date. This is especially limiting for inductive studies, where an open-ended, exploratory approach is needed. As has been the experience in this research, this search function can often be unreliable.

The second obstacle is that the only means for accessing older posts is to manually scroll through the entire feed in linear order (backwards from the newest post). There is no way to limit posts to a particular time period or to 'jump' to a specific date or bookmark progress, meaning the process can be physically laborious and time consuming. As this research encountered by way of multiple dispiriting instances of pages freezing and overheating laptops, this can be an onerous task for many computers, and consequently the researcher operating them.

While automated methods of data collection exist – such as harvesting bots, robots, spiders, or scrapers – they are not without their complications. Two Facebook specific scrapers were identified in the early stage of this study. The first, Netvizz, is now defunct and the second, Ncapture, appears to have limited success when collecting posts from Facebook groups (Ncube, 2021; Villegas, 2016). According to the site’s terms and conditions, such automated methods require prior permission from Facebook (Meta, 2025). As mentioned above, there are few research methodology books or articles that address how to collect data from Facebook (Lathan et al., 2023). Automated methods were not used in this study as they come with substantial questions concerning research ethics (Brewer et al., 2021) and as such are not aligned with the Māori data sovereignty and ethical approach of this study.

This research was built around these limitations. A month-long time frame was chosen for the formal data collection as it was feasible to scroll through, even if still time-consuming. Posts were manually copied and pasted into Microsoft Word, though this method truncated comments and made video or photo-heavy posts harder to archive. In such cases, screenshots and links were used instead.

This experience underscored one of the paradoxes of Facebook. That is, despite the site hosting an ever-growing collection of rich, everyday social data which is stored, potentially forever; due to the affordances of Facebook’s interface it can be difficult, and in some instances, impossible, to access.

### **3.8 Analysis of Data**

#### *Ethnographic Content Analysis*

This study employs ethnographic content analysis (ECA) to examine data from the two selected Facebook groups. This qualitative method draws together the structured conventions of content analysis with the contextual richness and detail of ethnography. It enables deep social analysis, exploring both what is said but also consideration of the underlying cultural contexts – allowing the researcher to ‘read between the lines’ of the data.

Originally applied in studies involving television, radio broadcasts, magazines, newspapers and advertisements (Altheide, 1996), ECA has since been adapted to internet-based analysis

(Boellstorff et al., 2012; Kozinets, 2015), including forums and social media posts (Porter & Ispa, 2013).

This hybrid methodology is employed in this study as it allows for a research design centred on exploration (Altheide, 1996), which is well-suited to the open-ended research questions. ECA is both inductive and reflexive, encouraging researchers to revisit earlier stages of the analysis as new themes and patterns emerge (Altheide, 1987). Crucially, its flexibility supports a Māori-centred study by avoiding rigid, predefined categories and allowing data to guide the analysis.

This research follows Altheide's (1987) steps for conducting an ECA, with reflection given to the considerations made by Boellstorff et al. (2012) and Kozinets (2015) to address the necessary adaptations to researching online. Detailed outlines of these steps are set out in the following sections.

A total of 448 posts and their comments gathered during data collection periods were analysed using ECA to uncover emergent themes through discovery and description. A process of manual coding was applied to the data set. Both original posts and comments were analysed holistically, treating multimodal elements – text, photos, videos, likes and comments – as unified “dialogues”. This aligns with approaches used in prior social media research (Farina, 2015; Nguyen, 2023).

Before embarking into the process of coding, I immersed myself in the dataset by reading all posts to understand the depth and context. In utilising ECA, I developed an inductive coding method that was guided by the two research questions, the literature review and a preliminary review of the gathered data. As part of this flexible and iterative process the category creation was revised as the analysis went on and new patterns and themes were uncovered within data. Copies of the 448 collected posts and their corresponding comments were collected and organised manually by data classification and thematic coding. Data was textually analysed in relation to the two separate research questions drawing on previous research as well as broader social, political and historic contexts to draw inferences from the data.

For the first question (*How do these Facebook groups contribute to an evolving concept of kai Māori?*) key themes were identified within the data, including posts and comments. Key to this

question is 1) the concept of kai Māori, and 2) its evolution. The concept of kai Māori contains a rich history of ingredient, technique, specific dishes and the traditions of transmitting this knowledge between generations. Its evolution concerns a myriad of cultural, environmental and historical forces. Critical to the latter is the enduring impact of colonisation and dispossession.

Drawing on the background research covered in Chapter 2, including traditional dishes, ingredients and techniques, as well as the historical evolution of this, I identified the two key following themes through an inductive, iterative process

- 1) The material continuity of kai Māori through the sharing of dishes, ingredients and techniques
- 2) The continuity of the tikanga, values and practices associated with kai Māori

Within these two themes, several sub themes were identified as having significance within these kai Māori Facebook groups.

To address the second question, *What kinds of relationships define these online kai communities?*, in-depth engagement with the data guided the development of key themes. Central to framing this enquiry is the recognition that the Facebook groups at the heart of this study are not bound by traditional models of Māori community. Instead, these digital spaces represent novel forms of affiliation and belonging that are self-assembled around a shared interest in kai.

To support the thematic development, I drew on existing literature on online communities, helping to frame and refine the themes. A thematic analysis approach was used, focusing on identifying and interpreting recurring patterns of meaning within the data. The resulting themes encapsulate the core ideas, concepts and experiences conveyed by group members through their posts and comments. Through an inductive and iterative analysis, four key themes emerged.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined my research design, considering the application of digital ethnographic content analysis within online Māori communities. Furthermore, it maps out the ethical

challenges arising from collecting textual data from the two Facebook groups. While the design of Facebook makes it possible for researchers to access group content without the explicit consent of members 'lurk' among online communities, this 'lurking' raises important ethical questions. Whether or not informed consent is justifiable in online settings, is complicated by the blurred boundaries of publicness and privateness within online spaces, a matter that is subject to ongoing debate among scholars.

This thesis contends that forgoing informed consent, in the context of this study, is justifiable given the nature of the groups studied and the type of data collected, as well as the precautions taken to protect the privacy of group members in the reproduction of this data. As well, I argue that asking for prior consent from all members of these online communities would have been logistically unworkable and even potentially disruptive to group dynamics and the quality of the data collected. The next section will present the findings which helped me answer my research questions.

## Chapter 4: ‘Kai Māori 2.0’: The Facebook Group as a Site of Evolving Culinary Tradition

### 4.1 Introduction

As the digital world continues to reshape our lives, the line between the physical and the virtual is becoming increasingly fluid. Elements of everyday life, once rooted in physical experience – such as sharing kai – are increasingly mediated through digital technologies. In online spaces, cultural expression and community take on new meanings, shifting from place-based relationships to connections, sometimes fleeting, driven by kaupapa or shared interests. For Māori, kai is intrinsically linked to collective identities and the expression of traditional values. But how do these practices translate into a virtual environment?

In this chapter I explore how the kai Māori culinary traditions are sustained and reimagined within Facebook groups. I present the findings that address the first of my two research questions: *How do these Facebook groups contribute to an evolving concept of kai Māori?*

The two groups examined – Kai Maori and KAI Basket NZ – demonstrate different degrees of explicit Māori identity. Kai Maori is more overtly grounded in Māori culture, while KAI Basket NZ has looser cultural affiliations, though Māori culture and values are still heavily reflected in the content shared. Neither group requires members to identify as Māori in order to participate, yet both function as sites for the expression and negotiation of Māori food practices.

Drawing on the historical outline of kai Māori in Chapter 2, which establishes kai Māori as both syncretic and strongly tethered to tradition, I organised the data into relevant thematic categories. This approach aligns with Beaton’s (2007, p. ii) assertion “that an Indigenous people such as Maori can in fact absorb outside influences whilst still retaining an inherently Maori culinary tradition”. This thesis understands kai Māori as encompassing both its tangible, edible components as well as its complex, interconnected and relational dimensions. Accordingly, these themes were broadly divided into two areas: the continuity of dishes, ingredients and techniques; and the the continuity of tikanga and values that underpin the gathering, preparation and sharing of kai. Within these overarching themes, the data has been organised into secondary categories based on recurring patterns emerging from the data. Each of these categories are profoundly

interconnected, however, it was necessary for the purposes of this analysis to discuss each in isolation.

## **4.2 The Sharing of Dishes, Ingredients and Techniques**

As Chapter 2 underscored, kai is a central aspect of Māori identity. And like Māori identity more broadly, the Māori culinary tradition has persisted while perpetually adapting to external influences. Throughout history, Māori have held on to traditional ingredients, methods and tikanga related to food, whilst adopting new ingredients, cooking styles and ways of eating. This dynamic and ever-changing culinary tradition has generated a codified repertoire of conventional dishes, ingredients and techniques, well established within literature, and common understandings of kai Māori, which are replicated, tinkered with and in some cases, entirely deviated from within these online spaces.

The Facebook groups at the centre of this study were brimming with virtual renderings of dishes, ingredients and techniques, with clear links to established Māori culinary traditions. The continuity of customary kai Māori was immediately visible in the posts and comments where snapshots of codified dishes like toroi, boil up, hāngī, raw fish, steamed pudding and takakau and ingredients like pūhā, kūmara, tītī, kamokamo and a range of kaimoana (covered in more detail in the following section) were bountiful. These parallel the forms of kai Māori described by Beaton (2007) in her study of cookbooks which tended to combine pre-colonial and post-colonial ingredients or techniques, whereby it was very rare for a dish to be made up of entirely pre-colonial ingredients and techniques.

In one instance, a group member posted a video of a bowl of kānga pirau, or rotten corn – a dish within the kai Māori culinary tradition that weaves together the post-colonial ingredient corn with the pre-colonial technique of fermentation by way of water soaking. The post, which focuses on a bowl of kānga pirau generously doused in cream at a home dining table, is accompanied by a caption explaining that it had been years since the poster had eaten the dish. As the member eats the delicacy they express enjoyment: “Oh I’m in heaven...this is just like porridge but better”. The comments on the post indicated the contentious nature of the dish. Some commenters shared their affection for it, while others light-heartedly shared their dislike of it. This virtual representation of kai Māori, like many others within these groups, was

accompanied by statements which link to the tikanga-based notions of kai Māori, such as ties to whakapapa, which will be expanded upon and discussed later in this chapter.

These depictions of kai Māori tended to take the form of casual photographs or clips – a style of photography or film facilitated by the proliferation of smartphones. These images largely focussed on the object of kai in isolation: usually presented in an everyday fashion and rarely displayed formally. For example, kai might be served straight from plastic containers, or with the kitchen sink in shot, or on the chopping board used to prepare it. In some instances the photographed kai might also include people in the form of selfies, posed shots or candid action photographs. Group members tend to embrace more casual, ordinary representations of kai, which differ from the unattainable, glamorous, idealised food found in digital ‘food porn’ (McDonnell, 2016). Kai, on these pages, might instead be idealised by way of its rarity, difficulty to access, nostalgia, freshness, or quantity – and in this way is presented in a way that is perhaps more comparable to meokbang culture. ‘Food porn’ in a typical sense might be normally associated with lush plates of food, piled high with expensive ingredients or glistening gold leaf, but in a kai Māori group, food porn might instead mean a piece of white bread piled with kina, or a bowl of porridge glistening with brown sugar.

The casual nature of the groups was emphasised by the location of the meals, which were predominantly located within home-based settings – on the stove, at the dining table or within gardens. Some kai, particularly kaimoana, were photographed outdoors and often near the site from which they were caught or gathered. There were very few instances of kai within the context of marae, or traditional gatherings. Therefore, while these groups are useful for understanding how kai Māori exists in domestic spaces, they are perhaps less relevant when it comes to understanding how kai Māori exists within traditional spaces. O’Carroll (2013c) has noted the potential risks of sharing knowledge and information virtually that would typically be dispensed face to face at marae on people physically ‘coming home’ to participate in their cultural institutions.

There was an absence of some dishes, ingredients and techniques mentioned within Chapter 2 of this study. For example, there were no instances of the pre-colonial plant ingredients gathered by Māori noted by Fuller (1978) – such as tī and nīkau, native orchids, pānako, hīnau berries, tutu

berries, raupō roots and pollen, gum from mānuka, nectar from flax-flowers and seaweeds like karengo and rimu. Nor were there examples of drying techniques which were, in the past, a popular method for preserving kaimoana. That certain fare or techniques do not appear within these groups may be attributed to various factors such as the labour-intensiveness of preparation, inaccessibility of gathering sites, changing tastes or the endangered or extinct status of some species. Such omissions may also be a peculiarity of these Facebook groups such as the geographical spread of group members and the casual nature of the postings, as well as the limitations of the spread of data collected for this study (e.g. seasonality may account for the lack of certain ingredients). As such methods of harvesting and preparation typically involve some level of mātauranga-ā-iwi, a-hapū, those that hold such knowledge may be less inclined to share it in large, amorphous groups that don't have a strict whakapapa basis for membership.

### *Kaimoana as a Cornerstone*

Kaimoana (and kai awa) were a prominent sub-category within the broader theme of traditional kai Māori across both pages. A diverse array of species – whitebait, prawns, tuangi, pipi, crayfish, tuna, pāua, mussels, fish, kina and more – made appearances in photographs, videos and text. Kaimoana could be exhibited in a multitude of stages along its journey from tide to the table: within their natural habitat, immediately after being caught, being prepared, presented on a plate and even as they were eaten. Such posts tended to gain many reactions and comments. These comments often expressed a narrative of simple enjoyment. In one post, for example, a member shared a photograph of their breakfast: a creative yet casual composition of pāua served two ways ('creamed' and 'sashimi') inside shells which were placed atop a chopping board (fig. 6). Members responded with affirming comments like "Tino reka" and "Yum". Kaimoana has, since Māori ancestors arrived in Aotearoa, been central to kai Māori culinary traditions. Such displays of affection are symbolic of the enduring significance of kaimoana for Māori and its status as one of the most robust connective threads to pre-colonial culinary traditions. This significance is further underscored by another photograph-based post which was shared with the caption "Enormous Oyster and small Kinas in Japan"\*<sup>7</sup> that accumulated more than one

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<sup>7</sup> In instances where I was unable to obtain informed consent from the poster to include their verbatim quote, I have jumbled words to make their post harder to discover and attribute to them. Jumbled quotes are denoted with an asterisk \*.

thousand reactions, revealing that kaimoana is inherently interesting to Māori no matter where in the world we are.

**Figure 6** Post from KAI Basket NZ: “Creamed pāua & sashimi for breakfast 🍴”



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 90 reactions, 7 comments.

Within this constellation of virtual kaimoana, kina were posted with particular fervour. Their spindly shells and golden-hued roe were the most frequently posted variety of kaimoana within the groups. In fact, they were one of the most recurrent of any ingredients posted on the whole. As well, it was these plentiful still lives of kina – in repurposed ice-cream containers, perched on rounds of takakau, laid over slices of toasted rēwena spread with butter or fresh white bread spread with jam, arranged next to diving gear, cooked in their shells, raw in punnets, served as a

snack before a night shift or during a smoko break – that seemed to engender the most animated responses: “gout material”, “far out”, “meke”.

Within these online communities, kina were treated with such a high degree of reverence that one member posted a short clip of three children, from toddler to teenager, each happily tucking into their own punnet of kina at the dining table. The intergenerational sharing of this food evokes concepts around whakapapa which will be further explored later in this chapter. Another instance of this fondness for kina was evidenced in a video posted by a member of a presumably self-written rap which outlined the process of gathering, preparing and eating kina, including the lyrics, “come for a dive let’s grab that dinner...if they’re creamy and fat then that’s our dinner”.

Among the portrayals of kina across these pages, a number of idiosyncratic patterns were clearly observed. Such idiosyncrasies mirror kina-eating conventions which have been popularised on other social media sites such as TikTok and Instagram, demonstrating that the way kai Māori is transmitted online has a cross-platform dimension. Within the Māori-populated corners of these social media sites, kina-eating, more than any other traditional kai, has become a distinctive symbol of and way of enacting Māori identity. The following are common conventions in posts involving kina: (1) An emphasis on the size of the roe by using the palm of hands or household objects for scale. (2) A manner of eating kina that includes dramatically slurping one (or more) of the roe at a time. And (3) serving kina with jam on toast, or other sweet foodstuffs like ice cream or cake.

**Figure 7** Post from KAI Basket NZ: “Kina are onnnn atm from Wellington #nga\_mihi\_Tangaroa”



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 709 reactions, 73 comments.

The enigmatic nature of kina confers them a symbolic weight that surpasses other beloved kaimoana. This may stem from the way kina, more than other seafoods, have long been subject of Pākehā disdain – derided for their spooky, barbed appearance and their innards that are simultaneously slimy, metallic, bitter, acidic, briny and creamy. Mrs Keita Kohere’s 1908 (p. 6) prediction that “once prejudice is overcome” Kina will become “a fit dish for epicures” express both an awareness of Pākehā aversion and a firm belief that the kai will endure. Some theorists suggest that colonised groups may abandon “inferior” foods to assimilate (Kalcik, 2001). Yet Māori, despite being cognisant of this stigma, have not abandoned kina – perhaps because of their deep roots in our culinary traditions (Beaton, 2007).

The concept of disgust is nothing new to Māori – or to any colonised people. Our culture, beliefs and even cravings have often been framed as wrong or repulsive through the colonial lens, while, conversely, Western tastes are positioned as ordinary and good (Beaton, 2007). This dynamic is central to colonisation itself. Kina, in many ways, stand in stark contrast to Western ideals of what food should be. So for Māori, beyond pure gastronomic pleasure, the supposedly ‘difficult’ characteristics of kina may be part of the allure. Eating kina represents ancestral sustenance, but at the same time a wholehearted rejection of imposed Western norms. Slurping them dramatically or eating them with cake only emphasises that defiance. This stoic indifference to Pākehā aversion has become a defining feature of kai Māori and Māori cultural expression more broadly. During a period of anti-Māori sentiment and political attacks on Māori identity, culture and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, such expressions of unapologetic cultural pride have taken on a heightened symbolic relevance.

The appeal of kina within these digital spaces also lies in the joy of shared experience. Social interaction and conviviality enhance the appeal of food; seeing others enjoy something serves as a powerful motivator to try it oneself (Eyal, 2014; Rozin, 1990). Within these Facebook groups, the sharing of images of kina allows members to virtually participate in each other’s experiences, helping to further drive the online popularisation of kina consumption as a uniquely Māori ‘viral’ food. The pleasure derived goes beyond the food itself – it’s also woven into the social interactions which accompany it (Marty et al., 2018).

Despite the popularisation of these ways of eating kina on the internet, such presentations could elicit an assortment of responses. For example, one group member posted a snapshot of their breakfast of two blackberry jam slathered slices of toast that are each cloaked in kina (fig. 8). The post gained hundreds of comments, which ranged from horrified, to envious. The influence of these groups in creating food culture is demonstrated by the various commenters who wrote that while they had not tried it themselves, the combination of sweet jam, melted butter, hot toast and kina sounded appealing and that they would be open to trying it. Presumably, Mrs Kohere would be delighted by the kina-loving Māori epicures within these Facebook groups.

**Figure 8** Post from KAI Basket NZ: “Homemade blackberry jam and Kina on toast for parakuihi #nga\_mihi\_Tangaroa”



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 667 reactions, 365 comments

### *Kai Māori as Fusion*

Within the Facebook groups, kai Māori takes on a multifaceted presence. Traditional dishes, ingredients and techniques – rooted in both pre- and post-colonial Māori culinary traditions – were omnipresent. However, conventional forms coexist at the virtual table alongside more unconventional expressions. Some built upon existing culinary traditions, while others diverged entirely, lacking any clear ties to established traditions.

One of the key ways that kai Māori is reimagined within these Facebook groups is through the various creative adaptations of traditional ingredients, dishes and techniques shared by members. Members regularly shared innovative takes on kai Māori that expand beyond customary

definitions. These creations which retain links to the past while embracing change exemplify Beaton's description of kai Māori as "a continuous and evolving tradition" (2007, p. 75).

One way this occurred was through the fusion of kai Māori with elements from other culinary traditions. For example, one group member shared a hybrid meal of pāua patties and crayfish tails, alongside kebabs and tzatziki, melding Māori culinary traditions with those deriving broadly from the Middle East and Mediterranean. Likewise, another group member amalgamated Polynesian and Māori culinary traditions through their posting of a dinner of palusami and corned beef with kina and frybread. One especially diverse meal shared to the group by way of a video post included povi masima along with green banana and taro in coconut cream, which are both typically associated with Sāmoan cuisine; chop suey given a Korean twist by way of the addition of gochujang and rice cakes; plus raw fish and kūtai. These eclectic meals, where kai Māori is fused with a diverse array of culinary traditions, reflect the globalised nature of contemporary food culture and systems. Māori have always adopted and continue to take on new influences as part of culinary traditions. For Māori, whose whakapapa is diverse and multi-layered (or whose personal culinary traditions may be influenced by other factors like marriage, migration, friendships), postings of fusion meals also serve as edible expressions of their personal hybrid cultural practices.

**Figure 9** Post from KAI Basket NZ: “Using my Rewana bug, I made crumpets, so Rewana crumpets toasted, topped with mushrooms and bacon, couple of poached eggs for hubby with balsamic reduction...”



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 796 reactions, 93 comments.

At other times, culinary evolution took the form of reworking a single traditional dish. One striking example came from a group member who shared their ingenious use of rēwena ‘bug’ (fig. 9). Traditionally, this ‘bug’ – a starter culture made from fermented potatoes – is employed as a natural leavening agent to bake loaves of rēwena. These starter cultures can carry their own whakapapa, as they are often passed down through generations and given their own unique names – those unique stories are baked into each loaf (Muru-Lanning, 2023a, 2023b). In this case, however, the group member used the bug not to bake a standard loaf, but to make crumpets, topping them with mushrooms, bacon, poached eggs and a balsamic reduction. This innovative adaptation of rēwena received hundreds of likes, indicating approval from the group. Many commenters tagged other Facebook users in the comments, presumably to draw their

attention to the post and to encourage them to try the recipe (which the poster had shared in the comment section) themselves.

The lively responses to this post illuminate the reverence for rēwena within these groups as well as the shared enthusiasm for creative adaptations of traditional kai. Rēwena itself is a compelling symbol of adaptation: although breadmaking was introduced by Pākehā, Māori developed rēwena as a uniquely Māori form of sourdough, utilising new ingredients and tools in ways that aligned with existing culinary practices. Rēwena exemplifies the way that Pākehā ingredients and methods have been adjusted and refashioned by tangata whenua in distinctly Māori ways. Within this context, this creative adaptation transmitted via Facebook is simply the latest chapter in the evolving story of Māori breadmaking traditions.

Adaptations of kai Māori within these groups don't arise solely for the sake of creativity – they can also be born from necessity. One poster shared a closeup photograph of their homemade toroi, a traditional fermented dish usually made with mussels (or other kaimoana) and pūhā or watercress. However, instead of using watercress, they had substituted spinach. When asked about their choice to use spinach by another group member in the comments, they explained that living in Melbourne made it difficult to source pūhā, so they adapted with what was available. Another commenter thanked them for the idea, sharing that they too lived in Australia and struggled to find pūhā. Since the earliest Polynesian ancestors' culinary adaptations to the new climates, soils and food resources in Aotearoa which were vastly different to the tropical Pacific Islands they had left behind, adaptations deriving from necessity, like this spinach-filled toroi, have been a perpetual feature of the evolution of kai Māori. While the prevalence of the Māori diaspora, particularly in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Hamer, 2019; Kukutai and Pawar, 2013), presents new challenges for the continuity of kai Māori, it is not an entirely new experience. Since colonisation, a confluence of factors including land alienation and urbanisation severed Māori access to traditional food gathering sites, natural resources and practices that had sustained communities for generations. In response to such hurdles, traditions have been tweaked, reworked and modified in ways that underscore the enduring resilience and adaptability of kai Māori. As has always been the case, our persistent cravings for our kai outweigh the obstacles to making it.

Kai Māori has always been shaped by the integration of new and introduced ingredients, tools and techniques, which Māori have adapted to suit their own tastes and merged with traditional food practices (Leach, 2010). By way of their fusions and adaptations, these digital communities carry on this long standing pattern of transformation and synthesis. Reflective of the assertion that Māori can “absorb outside influences whilst still retaining an inherently [Māori] culinary tradition” (Beaton, 2007).

### *Decoupling from Tradition*

A small portion of posts on these pages showed little to no obvious connection to the traditional forms of kai Māori discussed in the literature. Among these were images of casual, everyday comfort food like marmalade on toast, corned beef with instant noodles, banana cake or roasted chicken and rice. Some postings displayed dishes typically considered part of broader New Zealand national cuisine – baked beans, roast dinners, condensed milk dressing, Jelly Tip ice cream and cheerios. Others featured dishes with distinctly international origins, including renditions of Cantonese prawn toast, Vietnamese phở, English toad in the hole and Tex-Mex nachos. It was apparent from these posts that members of these online communities are not rigidly confined to the traditional kai Māori repertoire as defined in academic literature, or by broader cultural assumptions.

One particularly relevant example within this category was a video posting showing a bowl of pink-tinged mainese – a traditional potato salad from the Cook Islands – which was shared by a group member who explained in the caption that their whakapapa is both Māori and Rarotongan. They expressed pride in this dual identity. As with the fusion dishes discussed in the previous section, these examples of kai – which may not have an explicit link to traditional kai Māori – highlight the complexity of contemporary Māori identity. The way we eat, much like our broader identity, is often shaped by whakapapa, relationship, migration, overseas experiences and everyday social interactions.

Kai Māori is not neatly defined. It is complex, dynamic and ever-changing, varying not only across iwi, hapū and whānau, but from one individual to another. This diversity of tradition makes it difficult – if not impossible – to neatly distinguish between what is ‘traditional’ and what is not. And attempts to do so are inherently tenuous. Some dishes found within these groups

might seem entirely unrelated to traditional forms of kai Māori. Yet, they may nonetheless be tethered to traditions in unexpected and obscure ways. Take trifle (fig. 10) or porridge, for example – both popular in these groups. At first glance, these two dishes might seem wholly unrelated, but the techniques involved in preparing each dish echo long-standing Polynesian pudding traditions. Therefore, these could be seen as contemporary expressions of practices with far-reaching histories. That we cannot possibly account for all the cultural nuances, regional variations, and personal meanings enmeshed with these food practices, complicates the framing of this study. However, this complexity also enhances the potential of what these Facebook groups can reveal.

**Figure 10** *Post from Kai Maori:* “Using up left over ingredients from Xmas day, why not bang up another trifle...”



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 41 reactions, 7 comments

The activities within these Facebook groups reiterate the continuity of the material features of Māori culinary traditions – through ingredients, cooking techniques and dishes – while also allowing for change and reinterpretation. Within these groups, kai Māori is fluid, resisting rigid categorisation, and illustrative of the broader complexity of Māori identity itself. In the next section, I present the second theme in which engagement with these virtual representations of food becomes the site of the value-based dimensions of kai.

### **4.3 Tikanga Within Virtual Kai Māori Spaces**

The distinctiveness of the Māori culinary tradition is not only defined by the ingredients, dishes and techniques used, but also by a continuous transmission of culturally significant rules. While edible elements may evolve, adapt, or even be abandoned, Beaton emphasises that, “Culturally transmitted rules are also part of the continuum that creates a distinct Maori culinary tradition” (2007, p. 117). The tikanga surrounding food encompasses every aspect, from gathering and preparation to serving and consumption. This section examines how these Facebook groups serve as platforms for sharing the practices, knowledge and beliefs that underpin kai Māori.

#### *Consuming Landscapes*

The members of these groups are not only interested in the kai itself, but also in its geographical origins. This is best illustrated by mahinga kai – encompassing the practice of gathering food – which is a key theme within the postings. The groups abound with posts showcasing fishing, gathering and harvesting, which emphasise the connections to the source of kai. Mahinga kai practices are deeply rooted in whakapapa and mātauranga. These posts frequently touched upon the spiritual dimensions of kai, highlighting its inherent interconnectedness – a quality that transcends mere ingredients and speaks to a complex, intangible web of interrelatedness (Smith & Hutchings, 2024). Some posts implicitly expressed these themes, such as those casually sharing experiences of picking watercress, growing native varieties of potatoes, or gathering kaimoana, while others made the seemingly intangible links between kai, geographical features, ecosystems, tūpuna, atua and people explicit.

For example, in one video post, a group member advocated for a thoughtful approach to transporting freshly caught fish. While plucking branches from a mānuka tree and beginning to arrange them in a box at the back of a truck, they explained that the typical practice of tossing freshly caught fish straight into trucks or plastic bins “just doesn’t sit well for me”. While carefully laying the kahawai onto the bed of mānuka, they described the practical benefits of the method, but reiterated that the primary reason for this approach is rooted in tikanga: “more than anything it’s respect for the ika”. The comments in response to the video were positive, with one member sharing a whakataukī:

“Ko au te awa ko te awa ko au - I am the river and the river is me” This talks about how we are one with our awa, how our awa has sustained us both physically and spiritually. We are the Kaitiaki and have a responsibility to our awa to look after it as the awa has done for us, it’s descendants 🙏 What you're doing here is walking and breathing that whakataukī e hoa awesome!!!

This comment reiterated that the video is more than just a helpful tip; it embodies the complex web of connections that kai represents for Māori and exemplifies the role of kaitiaki in action.

Posts within the groups frequently reaffirmed the intimacy between kai and the places it originates from. These expressions of provenance often appeared in casual mentions – where an ingredient was gathered, where a dish was prepared – the specificities of such locations, bar a few exceptions, tended to remain undisclosed and private. Often, such references were anchored in the idea of “home,” positioning particular kai as tangible links to ancestral lands – either affirming a continued connection to home or evoking a sense of longing for it.

Sometimes group members highlighted the regional variations in Māori culinary traditions, asserting the diverse, place-based idiosyncrasies of kai Māori. One such example among the postings was a photograph of a jar of toroi, supplemented with the caption: “Growing up in the Far North by the sea, toroi was unfamiliar. The first time I tasted it was within Tainui boundaries, many years later. Now, I love it”\*. In this post, toroi was framed as a uniquely inland Māori delicacy – eaten in one place, but not another – simultaneously highlighting how food traditions are rooted in specific places, ancestral affiliations and traditional groupings which disrupt the idea of a monolithic Māori culinary tradition.

**Figure 11** Post from KAI Basket NZ: “Hahah bruh 😂😂😂”





*Note.* Engagement when collected: 99 reactions, 66 comments.

### *Critiques of Capitalism*

Expressions of kaitiakitanga extended to critiquing modes of production, distribution and consumption seen as harmful to kai sources. A frequent target of such criticism within these groups was the supermarket, where members expressed dissatisfaction with both the prices and sizes of kai available. Such dialogue was often prompted by group members posting images of plastic-wrapped, undersized fish or expensive kina. In these instances, the comment sections quickly ignited with negative comments about supermarkets, described with terms such as “rip offs”, “thieves” and “corporate muppets”. One member posted a picture (fig. 11) of supermarket kina being sold for \$29.99 per kilogram with the text “Hahah bruh 😂😂😂”. The absurdity of the price was immediately recognised, with commenters writing that they'd rather spend that money on petrol to gather their own or adding their own snaps of expensive supermarket kina to the thread. In another post, a member shared an image of a plastic-wrapped fish at a supermarket, asking the group if the fish was of legal size (fig. 12). The responses were overwhelmingly shocked by the fish's size, with some complaining about the commercial fishing industry. The

common sentiment throughout these posts was that prices are outrageous, kaimoana is becoming increasingly inaccessible and commercial practices are unjust. While there were no specific mentions of the cost of living crisis (a term used to describe a period where the cost of everyday essentials rises much faster than average household incomes), which has tended to frame discourse around food accessibility in recent times, concerns around affordability are implicit within these comments. This outpouring of frustration is an affirmation of kaitiakitanga, reinforcing the relationships that nurture kai. It highlights a collective understanding of the need to protect kai sources and conversely, a shared sense of anger over extractive, profit-driven practices that disrupt our relationship with kai.

**Figure 12** Posts Critiquing Supermarket Practices

<p>“PakNSav Sylvia Park”</p>	<p>“Is this legal size ? Pak n save (I've sent pics to fisheries ) 🙄”</p>
	
<p><i>Note.</i> Engagement when collected: 306 reactions, 74 comments.</p>	<p><i>Note.</i> Engagement when collected: 315 reactions, 29 comments.</p>

There was limited explicit kōrero about concerns related to kai sovereignty – such as the loss of mātauranga due to land dispossession, food security issues or diminished control over traditional knowledge and practices. This may be indicative of the broader focus of these groups, which are not strictly kaupapa-driven toward a specific goal or political objective. However, these issues were often present implicitly, particularly in positive discussions about the value of

intergenerational knowledge (as mentioned in the next section), and in dialogue to do with kaitiakitanga and critiques of supermarket practices (as mentioned previously).

### *Intergenerational Sustenance*

Posts relating to the practices, knowledge and beliefs that underpin kai Māori often involved an intergenerational dimension. This intergenerational element was displayed particularly clearly in instances where members shared their accounts of passing down knowledge and skills to their children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. A recurring theme in these posts was the transmission of mātauranga related to traditional practices, such as mahinga kai. In one such post a group member shared picturesque images of a beach alongside photographs of kina, pāua and pipi (fig. 13) and a caption describing their experience of transmitting mahinga kai practices to their children, which encourages others to do the same:

Mean day out yesterday with the kids went to a spot i never been to in 10 years still going strong the moana will all ways be my second home as we get old we need to teach our tamariki to provide as we were taught by our elders because we ain't going to be around forever.

**Figure 13** *Post from KAI Basket NZ*



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 342 reactions, 18 comments.

The kaitiakitanga values interlaced with passing down kai gathering skills were sometimes explicitly addressed. For instance, one member shared images of their children collecting pāua, with a caption explaining how they were not only teaching their kids how to gather pāua but also the importance of taking only what's needed and leaving the smaller-sized creatures to grow.

Other posts reflected the sharing of intergenerational knowledge in different forms – whether through teaching their children to lay a hāngī, baking with nieces and nephews, gardening with grandchildren, or, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, passing on the enjoyment of traditional kai such as kina. No matter the practice – whether it's making chocolate chip biscuits or gathering pāua – the recurrent theme of children learning in this intergenerational manner was widely praised by group members through the comments. Commenters often responded to such posts emphasising the importance of passing down such information, and were sometimes inspired to share their own memories of learning from grandparents in the corresponding comments. As one person recalled, “Aw this reminds me of my koro. He would take us on

adventures: hunting, trapping, catching tuna, collecting kai moana. I loved it. On top of making memories, I learned so much” \*. These moments within the groups underscore the deeply experiential nature of tikanga and reinforce the critical role of intergenerational sharing in preserving and passing on this knowledge. They also demonstrate the high regard that group members have for this practice.

### *Eating with our Tūpuna*

Kai offers a tangible bridge to our past, serving as a living link to our tūpuna. This is especially evident when consuming the pre-colonial forms of kai Māori (described at the beginning of this chapter) as each bite allows us to taste what our ancestors once ate – kūmara or kina are edible time machines. Within these groups the past tended to be evoked through personal memories and nostalgia where the appearance of a particular ingredient or dish transported group members back to moments with whānau who have passed. Such memory making regularly emerged in the comments, prompted by the kai featured within a post.

In one instance a casual post of a group member’s “light lunch” consisting of fragments of takakau submerged in a pool of cream and plum jam prompted another group member to share that the dish was a favourite of their dad’s, while another recalled their mother’s childhood memories of eating the dish with fresh cream straight from their cows. A photo of a boil up with a side of mussels in another post, sparked a fond memory for a commenter: “I’m laughing because this is exactly how my beautiful dad ate his kai. Boil up and any kind of kaimoana for tea”\*. These posts of kai offer a reminder that we can savour the same kai our ancestors and loved ones once enjoyed, and in many instances, that we once enjoyed in their company. Kai, in this way, becomes a means of reunion – connecting us to those who came before.

**Figure 14** *Post from KAI Basket NZ*



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 258 reactions, 48 comments.

These nostalgic recollections transformed food into a vehicle for reconnecting with loved ones across generations – parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and tupuna alike. At the mention of a particular dish or the sight of a resonant ingredient, nostalgic recollections intertwine with childhood memories, transforming food into a tangible way to engage with whakapapa.

A vivid example of this connection comes from a group member's recollection of a childhood breakfast, shared alongside a picture of their porridge (fig. 14). They wrote:

One of my most fave childhood memories was coming to the table almost every morning and our breakfast waiting for us looking like this 🍪 the brown sugar and little pools of

butter and then getting to pour our own cream and milk. Still my fave as an adult. Love you my mum xx

This seemingly simple bowl of porridge evoked rich and detailed memories of whānau from the poster and from other group members. Some used the comment section to share how the image made them miss their grandmothers; others reflected on their fathers making the dish for them, or how it was their favourite childhood memory shared with their kuia and koro. In some comments, group members directly expressed their love and longing for those who have gone, turning food into a living tribute to loved ones and a continuous celebration of whakapapa.

These dishes make whakapapa not just an abstract concept, but something that is tangible, clear and edible as group members are transported to the dining tables of their grandparents and childhood kitchens.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, we examined how the two food-based Facebook groups contribute to an evolving concept of kai Māori by observing and analysing the digital footprints of these communities – made up of shared images, videos and text. Within these groups, the experience of manaakitanga is one mediated by pixels; members’ ‘witness’ the preparation and sharing of kai through screens, without physically participating or experiencing this themselves. This represents a new form of kai consumption shaped by digital environments.

Among these instances of virtual consumption of kai, both continuity and transformation are evident. Culinary traditions are sustained, tweaked and reimaged through the appearance of material ingredients, techniques and dishes, as well as through expressions of tikanga – the values and customs that are intertwined with discussions of kai within these online spaces.

Ingredients, techniques and specific dishes are a central focus of these groups. A wide range of posts illustrates how tradition and convention can coexist alongside the new and unconventional, sometimes blending to create new culinary forms. Codified aspects of culinary tradition hold enduring significance in these spaces, particularly when it comes to kaimoana. However, even when the posted kai diverges from convention, its components often remain anchored in ancestral practices.

The posts also reaffirm that for Māori, kai remains far more than the sum of its physical components – the edible is deeply entangled with traditional values and ways of being. These platforms create opportunities to reinforce tikanga – whether through mentions of food provenance or connections to tupuna – that is associated with kai.

These observations show that kai Māori is increasingly expansive and fluid. Definitions of kai Māori as a culinary tradition remain closely tied to traditional forms, but they are also shaped by what Māori are cooking, catching and consuming in the present. The informal, everyday nature of these online communities reveal the prominence of certain dishes – like porridge or trifle – that, while not regularly discussed as emblematic of kai Māori, seem to be understood as such through their repeated appearance and communal acceptance. This disrupts the past-oriented essentialist understandings that tend to frame discussions of kai Māori. As scholars such as Leach (2010) and Cwiertka (1998) have noted, culinary traditions are never static – they are perpetually reshaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they exist. Within these online spaces, kai Māori is collectively imagined as a dynamic, evolving tradition – one that knits together ancestral knowledge with contemporary realities.

## Chapter 5: ‘Breaking Bread’: Forging Community Online Through Kai

### 5.1 Introduction

Traditional Māori social structures can be reflected online by way of virtual spaces like marae pages and whānau chat groups. However, the groups examined in this study are not extensions of customary structures such as whānau, hapū, iwi, marae, or rohe. Nor do they necessarily tidily parallel kaupapa whānau collectives which extend beyond customary group structures to encompass people bonded by a shared objective or goal, such as, kōhanga reo, kura kaupapa or waka ama communities (O’Carroll, 2013d). Instead, these digital communities are loosely assembled, representing new forms of affiliation and belonging which are self-assembled and centred around a shared interest in kai. These social ties transcend the traditional notions of community within te ao Māori which revolve around place-based or whakapapa-based affiliations. In short, these Facebook groups are not bound by traditional models of Māori community. This chapter therefore seeks to answer the question: *What kinds of relationships define these online kai communities?*

Using thematic analysis of Facebook posts to address this question, I identified four main themes. The first theme considers how group members establish a foundation of whanaungatanga within these online spaces, unpacking the fundamental building blocks of social connection in these communities. The remaining three themes build upon this relational foundation, centring on shared longing, collective experiences and knowledge sharing.

### 5.2 Forging a Foundation of Whanaungatanga

As O’Carroll (2013d, p. 122) observes, “whanaungatanga, once limited as a face-to-face practice, has become common in virtual spaces where families (existing and new connections) and friends are maintaining and strengthening ties and relationships”.

Much of the interaction within these Facebook groups occurs entirely online, untethered from physical or offline relationships. However, this virtual nature does not diminish their significance as sites of sociality, community and whanaungatanga. As Boellstorff (2008) has argued, virtual worlds are places – socially constructed through interactions – and over time, these spaces evolve into communities. These Facebook groups, like many others with memberships in the

hundreds of thousands, embody broad community structures where most members do not know one another personally, or share traditional forms of affiliation, yet they are brought together by shared interests and goals (Tenuche, 2018).

With its name as a clue, participation in social media is, by definition, a social act. Joining a Facebook group is essentially an intentional move toward community and connection, motivated by common interests. It has been noted by Lavis (2017) that sociality is inherent to the internet (Miller & Slater, 2000), and this is only enhanced when the focal point is food, often considered to be a fundamentally communal activity.

Within these kai Facebook groups, a casual and friendly form of sociality underpins the creation and reinforcing of interpersonal ties. Group members effectively "break bread" together online – sharing photos and videos of kai, exchanging stories, asking questions and offering words of encouragement. The tone of interactions is typically warm, inclusive and light-hearted. These dynamics pervaded much of the posting and commenting on the groups no matter the specific content – in fact, this dynamic epitomised the atmosphere of the groups. For instance, one member shared a candid account of their struggles with making rēwena, to which others responded with kindness, tips and even admiration – another group member asked the original poster for advice, which was readily given. In another example, a user posted a photo of their homemade afghans and banana cake, inspiring another to share a separate post of their own baking while modestly noting their cake was “nowhere near as yum as yours”\*. While they may not know each other beyond the bounds of these online spaces, group members engage with each other in ways that are supportive, caring and socially reciprocal.

The light-hearted, kai-centric nature of these online communities helped to foster a sense of social cohesion. Positivity usually prevailed among the posts and comments. On the rare occasion that unkind comments were made, the community typically rallied around the affected person, perhaps calling out or challenging the unkind comment, thereby reaffirming shared norms of the group. Group admins also played a key role in upholding respectful and inclusive environments by enforcing the rules set out in the group description page and setting the tone for interaction.

There were moments where deeper emotional connections and enduring bonds became visible. In one observed group, members occasionally circulated photos or recipes for a particular pudding in tribute to a well-respected group member who passed away. These posts attributed the recipe to this group member and also often included brief tributes, signalling the persistence of personal legacy and memory in virtual spaces. Such postings made apparent the enduring bonds and emotional depth that can develop in online communities.

There is also evidence that these digital relationships sometimes spilled into the offline world. In one post, a group member shared a photograph of their abundant taro harvest. Among the many comments – ranging from praise to requests for gardening advice – were several asking if they would be able to collect some taro from the poster. The original poster responded warmly, inviting anyone in his town to come by and collect some, even sharing his address. Occasionally, members used the comment section of posts to enquire about potential mutual relations or to ask about iwi affiliations, reaffirming traditional forms of association that exist beyond the digital realm. These interactions suggest that groups might also serve to foster whanaungatanga in offline contexts, beyond the virtual space.

Through the exchange of images, recipes, stories and casual conversation, these Facebook groups foster genuine social ties and a sense of whanaungatanga. They demonstrate that even in virtual spaces, community can thrive, shaped by shared culture, values and everyday acts of kindness.

### *Feasting Through the Screen*

It is important to underscore that at the most rudimentary level, these online groups operate as spaces for group members to share images and videos of food. A significant portion of the comments left on postings were some kind of variation on the word ‘yum’: such as, ‘Yummy’, ‘Yummy’, ‘YUM!’, ‘yum as’, ‘Yarrmmm’, ‘Yumbo’, ‘Yumz’, ‘Yahhhmmmmmm’, ‘Yup yum bro!!’ The prevalence of this category of comments reveals something of the foundational motivations for partaking in these groups: to a large extent members consume photos and videos of food for pleasure. This shared interest in the enjoyment of kai is the essential binding agent to these online communities.

Discussions of the relationship between pleasure and sharing of food online are often examined through two forms of closely related contemporary internet phenomena previously mentioned: “food porn” (Lavis, 2017) and “meokbang” (Donnar, 2017). Much of the data found in these groups, which is predominantly images or videos of kai, fits within broad definitions of these phenomena – though, as the previous chapter underscores, these tend to take uniquely Māori forms. Such resemblances to “food porn” or meokbang within this data offer a glimpse into the way that Māori partake in a more universal culture of food online, while also maintaining uniquely Māori approaches to such participation.

One group member, for example, posted a Māori-fied meokbang. In the video they addressed members of the group with an easy-going greeting: “kia ora whānau, how’s everyone today?” from what looks like a home kitchen. With a fork, they lift oyster after oyster after oyster to their mouth, before describing them as “fat, creamy and succulent”. The comments beneath the video reflected the enjoyment and appreciation of other group members. As observed by Donner (2017), the act of sharing these seemingly private moments – casual snapshots or short clips of everyday food in domestic settings – can foster a sense of intimacy. This blurring of public and private spaces helps to strengthen communal bonds in digital environments. As well, the combination of the inherent sociality of eating and the internet, means that such practices can be compelling sites of community, intimacy and relationships (Lavis, 2017).

The literature about online food sharing has emphasised that eating is not just solely a material act, but one that transcends the materiality of food, or the physical experience. Food can therefore be ingested through screens, consumed not by our mouths and stomachs, but by our eyes and our brains – a phenomenon Lavis (2017, p. 198) describes as the “virtual consumption of imagised food”. On these Facebook groups, we witness moments of voyeuristic pleasure as group members engage with images of kai, leaving comments like: “I can imagine the taste of that” or “I want to lick the screen”.

While traditional expressions of manaakitanga – forging relationships and strengthening communities through shared food – may not exist in a conventional sense on these pages, the act of sharing of beautiful imagery of kai with strangers online, and the reciprocal desire to visually consume such kai, can be seen as a virtual form of manaakitanga. As social media has become a

new ‘third place’ for communities to gather, the sharing images of food online has become “rich with social, cultural, and relational significance”– even if it cannot replace the entire experience of eating with others in physical space (Bouvier, 2018, p. 157). Community is still being forged through kai – albeit through phone screens and imagination, rather than at a shared dining table.

### **5.3 Longing Through Cyberspace**

A vast quantity of postings and comments on these Facebook groups expressed a deep sense of longing. This longing was usually engendered by the mention or the visual presence of specific kai, which served as powerful reminders for some group members. The object of longing may be the food itself – where group members conveyed their desire for a tasty-looking plate of kai. These instances of longing were also frequently attached to memories of the past, people or place.

These groups are in many ways communities forged and anchored in collective experiences of longing and the intimacy fostered by this sharing. In many instances group members were united by a shared longing for traditional notions of place and community in te ao Māori. These links to particular times, people or places are deeply intertwined with traditional Māori conceptions of kai. Explicit expressions of longing for the past tended to be interlaced with longing for particular people. In many cases within these Facebook groups, seemingly mundane kai prompted comments that wove nostalgic recollections of childhood with mentions of particular whānau who were deeply missed by group members. In this way, the posts and reactions within the Facebook groups became a form of collective memory-making.

#### *Longing From Across the Moana*

Some of the clearest articulations of this sense of longing were observed in the scattering of posts and comments from group members who live overseas – particularly those based in Australia. Social media allows Māori who live away from their hau kāinga to maintain links to culture, identity and language (O’Carroll, 2013b). The data revealed that a significant portion of activity in these Facebook groups related to diasporic Māori communities in Australia. This is perhaps unsurprising given that more than 170,000 – nearly 20% of the global Māori population – live in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Physical distance from one’s hau kāinga, marae or whānau make it difficult for people to access sources of kai, as well as the corresponding

mātauranga (O’Carroll, 2013d). Social media fills this absence and allows people to learn about culture remotely but this is not without risks and limitations.

Every so often, group members tagged their location using the platform’s geotagging function, or mentioned within the text of the post that they are located in Australia, but expressions of longing from afar most frequently occurred within the comment sections of posts. Comments like these mostly appeared in response to images of varieties of kai which are difficult or even impossible to find outside of Aotearoa. In one group, a posting of kaimoana sparked a response from a Brisbane-based group member: “Oh jeez, I would do anything for a feed of that 🤤”\*. While an image of boil up and mussels received a humorous request: “please send these to Australia...I’ll pay for the shipping 😊”\*. While members couldn’t physically enjoy such kai, these posts allowed them to participate in the cultural experience of it – even if from a distance.

But it’s not just the tastes of particular dishes or ingredients that were missed among these group members lacking direct access to it. The data included many mentions of feeling “homesick” and anticipation of returning home, suggesting that what’s longed for might be more than just the kai, but the people, places and cultural dimensions tied to it. As one commenter responded to a photograph of a group member’s “Hākari” of hāngī, green salad, raw fish, kūmara salad, chop suey, rēwena, fried bread and steamed pudding: “I can’t wait to get back home for summer to eat all this food I don’t get to eat in Australia – and the most important part of it all, being with whānau”\*.

These groups, then, serve a function similar to that observed in other studies of Facebook communities, where food sharing on social media becomes a bridge to homeland and cultural identity for transnational populations (Inserra, 2018; Nguyen, 2023).

Members also used the group to demonstrate how they maintain cultural connections through kai-related practices. For example, one member shared how karakia before meals was a way to maintain cultural identity while living in Australia:

When we sit at the dinner table, my children each take turns to say karakia. Since we live in Aus and I’ve married an Aussie, it’s real important that we at least keep a small part of

our reo alive within our whare while also teaching our kids to be grateful for the kai we have on our table.\*

In this way, the postings exemplify how the group serves as a kind of digital tūrangawaewae for members who are physically distant from their ancestral lands, marae or whānau. Images of everyday kai served as portals to place and identity, fostering whanaungatanga and affirming whakapapa across geographical divides.

#### **5.4 Shared Experiences**

Community building takes place through shared experiences, which in turn work to bond members of these groups. As previously discussed, food functions as a powerful marker of shared identity. Much of what is found on these pages involves group members resonating – or in some cases, not resonating – with the content of a post. In many instances this manifested as a shared affection or preference for particular delicacies, such as kina or rotten corn. A post of raw fish made with water in place of lemon and coconut, for example, elicited responses from commenters that they also preferred the dish prepared in this bare-bones way.

**Figure 15** *Post from KAI Basket NZ:* “Huntley palmer crackers and loving drinking my coffee out of this back in the day everybody had them cup 😊 the memories!”



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 2,500 reactions, 462 comments.

In other instances, this resonance took the form of shared recognition. Such is the case in a post of a group member’s lunch of Huntler Palmer crackers and a cup of coffee in a brown Arcoroc mug (fig. 15). This prompted a collection of delighted comments linking the mug to marae experiences. The ubiquitous cup was more than just a cup among these group members – it was instead a cultural signifier, instantly and universally recognisable as a feature of marae. For example:

At the Marae, kai iti always ready for manuhiri, old school, real butter cut in cubes, cheese, jam and Huntley n Palmers. You made your own. We still use Arcoroc cups but the kai iti, up another level, like grazing tables.

It was upon a foundation of shared desires and values that group members collectively celebrated their fellow group members' discovery of a verdant patch of watercress on their walk or, conversely, to empathise collectively over a beloved and passed down shelling knife breaking into two. These interactions became meaningful acts of connection – small affirmations that help to feed a larger sense of belonging.

We see how shared idiosyncrasies around kai can bind a community in a particularly illuminating post. One group member shared an image of mussel shells – most of the meat already eaten, but the “foot” of the bivalve still attached – captioned with: “Saving the tring gum for last!”. The term “tring gum”, was offered without explanation beyond the accompanying image, but those who are in the know instantly knew what was being referenced. This unspoken familiarity created a muted boundary between those who share in this practice related to eating mussels and those who don't. As one poster commented: “If you know, you know”.

The post received 143 comments, nearly all from people who recognised the reference and shared that the practice and the “tring gum” term resonated. Some noted that in their whānau, they used the alternative terms “twing gum” or “ching gum” but that the sentiment is essentially the same. Many commenters reflected that this practice – an appreciation for a part of the mussel often discarded by others – was learnt in childhood. As well, some related to practice to kaitiakitanga; around the value of kai and their frustration when “the best part” of the mussel is wasted by others. This is expressed in the following comment on the post:

Me too. Loved it as a child still love it as a 72 year old. Teach the moko to eat it as well. All or nothing the same with eating tuna . My Koro scaled , gutted the tuna before cooking & taught me as a child to eat fish including the head & spit out the fish bones. No waste of any fish , animal or plant that nourishes your body was wasted. You take the life you honour it by savouring what it gives you. That's just what my Koro & Nanny taught me.

Among these various responses was a thread of joyful surprise and realisation that this seemingly mundane practice is one that is shared. The very act of eating this part of the mussel, the playful name for it which references its chewiness, and the values surrounding it – respect for kai, intergenerational knowledge and avoiding waste – are all distinctly Māori. Even with slight

variations in the name, the underlying meaning of this culinary peculiarity served as a point of intracommunal connection for group members.

### *Memory as a Connector*

As Halbwachs (1950) contends, the act of remembering is not only a personal process but also a deeply social one – through it, we affirm our sense of continuity and establish bonds within groups. Individuals remember in dialogue with others, to validate and shape memories in alignment with collective understandings. Within this framework of shared experience, many posts and comments in the group centred around collective memory in relation to kai. Shared images of kai – most often mundane, everyday dishes – summoned diverse memories among group members. The act of posting allowed members not only to revive their own nostalgic ties to certain foods, but also to invite others to engage in dialogue, constructing collective memories in relation to particular kai. Through posting and commenting, group members collectively journey down memory lane.

For instance, one group member shared a photograph of a distinct combination their dad used to eat: kina and Madeira cake. In response, another member reciprocated with a different, albeit similar kai memory of their grandfather eating sponge cake topped with mussels. The two shared their amusement and bond over the peculiarity of these kaimoana-meets-cake combinations, finding humour and affinity in the quirks of their loved ones' tastes.

**Figure 16** *Post from KAI Basket NZ*



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 216 reactions, 39 comments.

Though the specific memories varied, they frequently occurred in relation to codified forms of kai Māori and were often tied to fond recollections of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. One poster shared a deeply personal post (fig. 16):

Blessed to be holding this Taonga - near on 100 year old Rewana bug, aptly named Haere me te aroha. My Māmā managed to get her over here to Perth from NZ about 20 years ago and it had been previously passed down to her. I have lived all over Australia and have always travelled and successfully managed to keep her with me, even a 3 year stint in Singapore.

The personal-nature and intimacy of this post invited a reciprocal memory from another group member, underscoring the profound links between the sensory experience of kai and nostalgia:

I can taste those flavours all the way from Australia. My grandmother always cooked her bread in a cast iron pot in the fireplace. I haven't eaten a proper one since \*

Most of these posters referred to childhood, where specific dishes are entwined with simplicity, resourcefulness, and the web of whakapapa and whanaungatanga that continue to guide their contemporary kai practices. One member, for example, posted a photo of their late-night snack: Māori porridge made from flour, hot water, cream and sugar – a dish they often ate as a child (fig. 17). “IYKYK” (meaning, “if you know, you know”), they wrote in the caption. The posting received an outpouring of responses, with group members sharing their own anecdotes and variations of the dish, each linked to different whānau members and childhood nostalgia. Names for the dish varied – korori, Māori porridge, reripi, ripiripi, repirepi, rerepi – highlighting whānau and iwi-specific language and practices which revealed the way that such affiliations with other community identities coexists within these novel online communities.

**Figure 17** Post from KAI Basket NZ: “IYKYK!...n NO,it's not Rice or Rolled Oats 🙄🤔👉...felt like it at 2am,Melbourne Time. 😊❤️”



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 69 reactions, 107 comments.

These posts demonstrated how kai continues to serve as a portal to the past. While the memories shared were distinct and rooted in individual experience, they were simultaneously collective – forming a shared form of storytelling. Storytelling is vital to the survival of Māori collective identities and interwoven with both personal and collective memories (Kukutai et al., 2020). In this way, the act of posting and commenting becomes a form of collective memory-making, reinforcing commonalities while honouring diversity among Māori.

### *Humour as a connector*

Shared cultural idiosyncrasies to do with kai often found expression through humour within these groups. It is through these lighthearted exchanges that social bonds are formed and reinforced. As Wilson (1979, p. 228) notes, “humour is the oil in the social machine, lubricating group dynamics, easing frictions that threaten group solidarity”.

Humour in these spaces frequently employed kai as its subject, relying on mutual understandings and experiences of kai. These were, in short, kai-based in-jokes. One such posting featured an image of a tray of fish heads next to a bag of chips, captioned simply “fish and chips” along with a laughing emoji. Hundreds reacted to the post, mostly using the laughing emoji. The joke landed within the group because it played on familiar expectations of the “classic Kiwi” meal, whilst simultaneously subverting these. The use of fish heads, which one commenter light-heartedly pointed out, are generally treated with aversion, perhaps even with disdain, within Pākehā communities, reclaims and reimagines the dish in a uniquely Māori way – fish and chips, Māori style.

One of the most recurring in-jokes within these groups was the light-hearted mention of “gout”, often understood to be triggered by our beloved traditional kai. Posts featuring kina, mussels, or other rich, purine-heavy foods often prompted playful references to the gout they might provoke in the comments: “I’ll happily put up with gout if it means I can eat this 🍷”<sup>\*</sup> or “just looking at this is giving me gout”<sup>\*</sup>. While the subject matter was serious, the humour spoke to a collective experience that is woven into the experience of eating for many Māori – something that will be familiar to many in the group, either personally or through whānau. In this way, these represented a darkly comedic way of acknowledging physical discomfort, while affirming community. A common punchline was the assertion: “I’ll eat it anyway” – underscoring not just resilience, but also the enduring love of kai, even in the face of its potentially painful consequences.

Political satire, too, occasionally appeared. One post showed a group member’s omelette breakfast ahead of joining Hīkoi mō te Tiriti protests against the Treaty Principles Bill in November 2024. The ingredients which make up this breakfast were more than just fuel for the march, they’re the punchline to a joke. The caption pointed out the irony of starting the day with

eggs before marching toward the “eggs” in Parliament – a pun instantly understood within the group. One commenter affirmed, “accurate”. The post, while light in tone, was speaking to a deeper political context, capturing the mood of discontent felt by many Māori at the time. Overt political content was uncommon in these groups and was still relatively rare during that particularly charged period in Aotearoa – beyond a scattering of links promoting petitions in opposition to the government’s actions or hīkoi information – so this post stood out. These online spaces generally centred on light-hearted sharing of kai where political threads take a more implicit form. Yet, because of a widely shared sense of political discontent, this post didn’t feel out of place or beyond the kaupapa of the groups. Solidarity is assumed and the humorous critique of the government was unlikely to be perceived as controversial – reinforcing the distinctly Māori nature of these digital communities.

Together, these postings exhibit how jest functions as a medium for expressing a distinctly Māori worldview and way of life. Whether through cheeky banter, dry reflections on shared health experiences, cultural commentary on kai, or subtle political critique, the humour speaks directly to the group’s collective identity. It’s through these moments that group members got to crack up – together – in cyberspace. As Carlson and Frazer (2021, 41) write “the bonds forged through Indigenous humour can have broader cultural implications, as they work to intensify a sense of shared belonging”.

### *Talking in te reo Māori*

Te reo Māori is a key marker of Māori cultural identity (Durie, 1998) and therefore, it is a common feature among discussions of the way Māori shared identity is expressed. However, it is not the dominant language within these groups. Te reo Māori was only found occasionally, peppered throughout posts and the corresponding comments. Where te reo Māori did appear it was often woven into expressions of mātauranga, kaitiakitanga, whanaungatanga and whakapapa. This use of te reo Māori most often took the form of specific terms for ingredients and dishes (e.g. toroi, hāngī, pūhā, kūtai, kūmara, tio) or words of praise (e.g. tūmeke, rāwe, tino reka, ka pai, meke) which tended to be interspersed with English in colloquial style. For example, one poster wrote, “Been hanging out for toroi so I went to pick me some puha and bought some kutai. Meke as Kai 😊😊” as a caption accompanying their photograph of a jar of homemade toroi (fig. 18).

**Figure 18** Post from Kai Maori: “Been hanging out for toroi so I went to pick me some puha and bought some kutai. Meke as Kai 😊😊”



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 86 reactions, 20 comments.

As these groups have large populations and are open to anyone, the prevalence of English, which is also the dominant language spoken by Māori, is not necessarily surprising. Due to colonisation and government policies of assimilation, only 23% of Māori speak te reo Māori (Statistics New Zealand, 2022). As such, this language choice could be interpreted as a natural development among these online communities in order to maintain accessibility to a wide audience. Still, there are rare instances where entire posts or comments were left in te reo. In one such occurrence, a commenter replied to a video post of a group member eating steak and oyster sandwiches with a piece of gentle advice: “Kia aata kai, e Tame, kei raru te puku 😊”, The various innovative applications of te reo Māori on these pages are examples of how the way in which kai is communicated within communities has evolved and adapted in response to these novel digital spaces.

## 5.5 Imparting Collective Knowledge

Almost everything shared within these groups can be understood as a form of knowledge. These online spaces serve as hubs where group members can learn about kai – through observation, discussion and participation as a community. This learning regularly occurs in explicit ways: group members directly offer or request recipes, tips and mātauranga. But it is more common that such learning happens more subtly. Many postings were rich with embedded knowledge: conveyed through images, but also vivid descriptions, personal anecdotes and sensory details.

As one person articulated in a post which had unravelled into a discussion of the various names for kororirori, or Māori porridge, simply scrolling through these posts and their attached comments becomes a source of informal education:

This was such a cool post. This was the first time I'd heard about this kai. I learned so much by reading all the different names for this kai, the stories and information about how it was made. So Awesome.\*

Even a seemingly simple image – like a photograph of ‘bubus’ which can also be called cat's eye or kanohi pūpū (fig. 19) – unfurled into a rich tapestry of collective knowledge-sharing. In this specific comment section group members (essentially unprompted) contributed hundreds of insights: different kupu for the species, tips for gathering and preparing, seasoning suggestions and stories related to specific rohe, hapū, iwi, or whānau traditions linked to the kai. Within these anecdotes we see how traditional conceptions of ancestral connections to community and notions of place can be expressed and even reinforced within these Facebook groups.

**Figure 19** Post from KAI Basket NZ: “Bubus for late lunch 🍷”



*Note.* Engagement when collected: 673 reactions, 232 comments.

Sometimes, knowledge-sharing becomes more intentional. Members posted questions or tips, seeking guidance on specific kai Māori from the wider group: how to best prepare pāua; how to identify a type of kaimoana; how to make kaeo, sea tulip, more palatable; how to make the perfect toroi or how to store and reheat steamed puddings ahead of a hākari. Responses were often generous and diverse, filled with practical and sometimes humorous wisdom. In this way, the groups bear some resemblance to the Māori community cookbooks of the 20th century which helped to document, codify and transmit kai Māori through members contributed by members of various communities.

In one instance, a person asked for help improving their rēwena. After receiving a flood of suggestions, they compiled and shared the advice back to the group:

Thanks to everyone who passed on tips for improving my loaves of rewena. The two main things I learnt were: 1) I needed far less sugar and 2) I should use potato water to

feed the bug and to make the bread. I can already tell my bug has improved. Here's a few pictures of my loaves fresh from the oven. I'm trying to make more dough and then splitting it in two to make smaller loaves. I also shaved the time in the oven to just one hour.\*

In some instances, group members turned to the community to supplement their fragmented knowledge around kai – fractured though the passage of time or the absence of people or place. One member posted: “Kia ora whānau, I am wanting to learn how to make kōura mara. I love it but my dad passed away many years ago and I never learned from him how to prepare it”\*. In response, some group members asked for more details about the dish, while others shared tips for preparing it – including how to manage its distinctive smell. The person was embraced through the generosity of shared knowledge, whereby the group collectively helped to fill the gap.

Engaging with knowledge about kai can also be a sacred and sensitive process. Because kai is deeply connected to whakapapa and can involve tapu knowledge, there is always the potential for sharing information that might not be meant for generalised public spaces. However, members often showed awareness of these boundaries. In one case, a user refrained from disclosing the location of a mahinga kai site – and was thanked by other group members within the comments for not revealing the gathering site.

One post encapsulated the interconnected themes explored in this thesis and highlighted what makes these online groups so distinctive in a relational sense. In a four-minute phone-recorded video, the member takes a warm, conversational tone: “Kia ora whānau, how's everyone today?” She goes on to share the outcome of her recent diving trip: “a couple of pāua”, “two kina”, and “a whole heap” of karengo. The camera is then turned to her lunch: karengo piled on white toast. “For me,” she explains, “eating this sort of kai – it's tino reka, it's beautiful, it's yum – but it also brings back memories of our kui and our kaumātua who used to eat these back in the day” evoking how kai can act as a portal through time and memory. She then acknowledges Terressa Kollat, a well-known kai gatherer with a large following on TikTok, saying: “Thank you for putting up your videos and teaching your mātauranga to all our whānau, our wāhine and anybody who watches your awesome videos”. In doing so, she highlights the ability of social media to sustain, transmit and reinvigorate kai Māori practices. The video, posted on the same day as the

passing of Kiingi Tuheitia, ends with an acknowledgment of his death, reflecting a sense of kotahitanga and shared mourning. In the comments, another group member replied to the video saying that they hadn't been diving since childhood and had been looking to reconnect with the knowledge: "I love watching your videos – thank you"\* . The original poster replied: "When I learn, everyone learns"\* .

Traditionally, mātauranga around kai was shared through close-knit, place-based communities. As those communities have been disrupted or dispersed, these digital spaces have become important vehicles for the cultural transmission of kai Māori. Māori have long adapted new technologies for knowledge-sharing – from oral storytelling to written forms, and now to digital platforms. These online groups – through their collectively gathered photos, recipes, techniques, stories and memories – are living archives of such knowledge.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter explored the types of relationships that define these two Facebook groups as online kai communities. These groups transcend traditional notions of community within te ao Māori, illustrating how digital platforms allow people to build and maintain communities untethered from physical or offline relationships. Within these groups, community identity is not necessarily grounded in iwi, hapū, or whānau ties, but instead emerges through identifying with two elements 1) a mutual love for kai, and 2) Māori cultural affiliations – the latter being implicit rather than explicitly required for group membership.

Kai is inherently relational – connecting people to each other, to ancestors, to atua, and to place – and Māori have long used kai to affirm and extend a sense of community. With the rise of social media as a contemporary 'third place' for social gathering, the online sharing of kai extends this relational practice. Through the exchange of recipes, photos, stories, and casual conversations, these Facebook groups cultivate connection, belonging and whanaungatanga, shaped by shared cultural understandings and a general spirit of sociality.

Underlying much of the activity in these groups is a sense of kotahitanga – unity and collective identity expressed through shared tastes, memories, longings, humour and values, even if this unity may be manifest more loosely than in a more defined kaupapa whānau groupings online

such as a waka ama community Facebook group. These online communities often become platforms for the assertion of a broad sense of collective Māori identity and pride, while also offering space for the expression of more specific and localised forms of culture. For many members, these Facebook groups also function as digital tūrangawaewae, particularly for those who are physically detached from their marae, whānau, or ancestral lands. Importantly, many interactions within these groups suggest that the relationships nurtured in these online spaces may also extend into offline contexts, further strengthening cultural belonging and continuity.

Nearly every post shared in these spaces can be read as a form of cultural transmission. These groups serve as contemporary repositories where members learn about kai through observation, participation and communal discussion. Historically, mātauranga related to kai was passed down through close knit, place-based communities. As those traditional networks have been disrupted or dispersed, online platforms have become critical vehicles for the preservation and sharing of Māori culinary knowledge. Māori have always been adaptive in their approaches to knowledge transmission – from oral traditions to written, and now digital platforms. In this way, these Facebook groups, through their collective sharing of photos, recipes, techniques, stories, and memories, act as living archives of mātauranga Māori.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion: Virtual Hākari

### 6.1 Introduction

This thesis explored the landscape of kai Māori Facebook groups, situated within the broader historical and cultural context of Māori culinary traditions. Applying digital ethnographic content analysis to two groups, Kai Maori and KAI Basket NZ, it examined how kai is represented, discussed and reimagined online. In doing so, it addressed two key questions: 1) How do Facebook groups contribute to an evolving concept of kai Māori? and 2) What kinds of relationships define these online kai communities?

The literature review and historical outline established kai Māori as deeply relational, encompassing not only edible components, but also tikanga, whakapapa, and the broader cultural meanings baked into the way we eat. It also highlighted kai Māori as dynamic and adaptive. Like a jar of toroi, it bubbles and evolves over time. The observations made in this study reveal how these digital spaces have become contemporary arenas for the collective transmission, celebration and innovation of Māori culinary knowledge – descending from the historical trajectory of kai Māori. Within these groups, kai traditions are sustained, adapted and reimagined, much as they always have, yet via everyday digital exchanges.

Underpinning this thesis is the concept of whakapapa. I was especially interested in how the kai shared in these groups connects to all things, including atua, te taiao, tūpuna, humans; the past, present and future. Though virtual spaces pose limits to how whakapapa is able to be expressed, it remains present in the way that kai is valued and discussed within these groups – revealing how kai endures as a conduit between past and present, people and place, the metaphysical and daily life.

Because kai is inherently relational, it naturally draws communities together. These groups, while not grounded in traditional conceptions of community within te ao Māori, illustrate how digital platforms allow communities to form that transcend physical or offline relationships. Within these groups, community identity and belonging is cultivated through common cultural understandings, sharing of knowledge, a general spirit of sociality – and, importantly, a mutual love of kai.

This finding was especially significant when it came to Māori navigating disconnection from whakapapa, whānau, whenua or iwi. The sensorial, social and spiritual experience of being physically in a place – the feeling of sand in your hands as you dig for kaimoana, the clattering buzz of being in the marae kitchen, smelling the smoke of the hāngī – cannot be experienced in the same way in a virtual space. So while these groups do not replace traditional forms of place, community or culture, and online sharing may provoke distance from traditional sites of kai transmission, the data suggests that these groups offer an accessible ‘midway point’ – a place of positive cultural nourishment that could potentially act as a gateway to deeper reconnection beyond the virtual world. For many, these groups provide a taste of home and belonging, reinforcing traditional notions of place and offering pathways to further engagement with Māori identity. This study only collected data posted to these groups, and did not interview group members, therefore limiting what it can say about how this sense of cultural connectivity is experienced by Māori first-hand. Further research might look to better understand how such online engagement is experienced by Māori beyond what they choose to post online through talking to group creators, moderators and members. Such studies might be inclined to make use of the search function within groups by using relevant search terms to narrow down the data and identify potential participants. My own experience with these groups, for example, has been almost exclusively observational, yet this hasn’t diminished their meaningfulness to me or the enjoyment I derive from them. These groups hold potential for reinvigorating relationships with culture, acting as both a bridge and a lure home.

Nevertheless, the way data is collected and used by social media sites like Facebook gives rise to concerns around Māori and Indigenous data sovereignty (Brown et al., 2023; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). Data shared on Facebook is collected and commodified; its use driven by a profit incentive (Zuboff, 2023). This means that data shared on Facebook could be employed for purposes that may in fact conflict with whakapapa based conceptions of kai. Despite its power to connect us, social media is not a politically neutral space. While this study has chosen to emphasise the positive and culturally generative aspects of these online communities, it does not do so in the absence of a political and critical lens.

## 6.2 Political Context

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any thesis of this nature existing in a vacuum, separate from the political currents of the time in which it was written. Yet the politics of kai Māori, and the politics of food, extend far beyond the politics of social media, big data and digital capitalism. Much of the local and global news I consumed in my day to day life while writing this thesis, heavily shaped my approach. Two events in particular weighed especially heavy: the legislative attacks on Māori by New Zealand's coalition government and the Israel-Gaza war. While each of these are distinct developments, happening at opposite sides of the globe, they share a common thread – the oppressive nature of settler colonialism – and, within their respective resistance movements, an entanglement with both social media and food politics.

Amid this, through hikoi and hui, and especially at occasions held at my own marae, Tuurangawaewae, I've been reminded of the centrality of kai – its ability to sustain not only bodies but also collective movements. Kai serves as both a practical and symbolic source of unity. Its preparation at these gatherings fuels shared purpose, while certain dishes and ingredients embody a shared cultural identity.

In Aotearoa, resistance and solidarity has been forged in the “real world”, on the streets, at marae, in the halls of parliament, but also online. Social media has become a key space for political organising, by way of infographics, news articles, protest instructions, submission writing tips, and viral moments, like Hana Rāwhiti Maipi-Clarke leading a defiant haka in Parliament which was viewed at least 500 million times, amplifying dissent (Manhire, 2024). Cultural resistance has also found its place online, asserting identity in deeply political ways.

Platforms like Facebook, as well as TikTok and Instagram have further transformed cultural resistance into acts of visibility, with posts written in te reo Māori, clips from Te Matatini, and, of course, images of kai Māori becoming powerful declarations of identity, and thus a valid addition to this korowai of resistance. The rising interest in kai Māori online reflects both a global fascination with food culture as well as the fraught political climate. As Waitoa et al. (2015, p. 48-49) note, “Many indigenous groups see cultural identity formation as a political act, in opposition to mainstream hegemony. Social media can facilitate this process”. In this sense, sharing a photo of boil up or slurping kina on social media (which, as Chapter 4 argues, has

become a sort of specifically Māori viral food practice) might be seen to hold political weight akin to carrying a tino rangatiratanga flag. As Kiingi Tuheitia's call to "be Māori – Māori all day, every day" (Muru-Lanning, 2024) reminds us, everyday acts of cultural affirmation are inherently political.

This entanglement of kai and resistance resonates far beyond Aotearoa. As such, the Israel-Gaza war has also coloured my approach to this research. In the ongoing struggle of Palestinians, food has always been central. Partly, this is because food is about continuity – the continuity of life, of basic survival, but also, the continuity of culture.

Beyond the practicalities of physical survival, food underpins the survival of links to the land, political sovereignty, ancestry, culture and tradition in Palestine (El-Haddad, 2024). Among Palestinians, the struggle for food sovereignty and to maintain traditional food culture has played a vital role in the pathway to self-determination. As journalist Yara Elmjouie explains, "For many Palestinians...cuisine is not just something you eat, it's a cultural record documenting generations of hardship and forced displacement under Israeli occupation but also the resilience and innovation it's necessitated" (AJ+, 2024). As I write this concluding chapter, *The Guardian* reports that Israel has closed crossings into northern Gaza, "cutting the most direct route for aid to reach hundreds of thousands of people at risk of famine" (Burke, 2025). The war on Gaza is not just a war of bombs, bulldozers and blockades – it is also a war on food. Alongside the ongoing bombardment, fishing in Gaza's waters is restricted and greenhouses, orchards, and bakeries have been destroyed – a wholesale annihilation of food systems.

Throughout this crisis, social media has facilitated online movements of solidarity like "digital gastro-solidarity". Coined by medical anthropologist Ashley Thuthao Keng Dam (2024, n.p), the term describes "internet-based collective organizational efforts to demonstrate sociopolitical solidarity for ideas, beliefs, and movements through the construction, tinkering, and sharing of ideas around the 'national foods' of a country and the identities of the cultural groups they may be associated with".

Like many, I have engaged with each of these issues in an everyday fashion, watching these situations unfold through my phone or laptop screen – scrolling, reposting and sharing content. As Waitoa et al. (2015, p. 49) has written "In the face of imperialist pressures, indigenous groups

use many tools for resistance; the most recent are tools of online dissent, activism and acts of solidarity which span the globe”. We live a “second life” (Boellstorff, 2008) within these online spaces – and researchers, too, inhabit that world. The urgency of these contexts has shaped this thesis, revealing how seemingly mundane topics like food and social media can carry profound significance. In a more material sense, these contexts have given further context to the data collected from these kai Māori Facebook groups. “To express one’s Indigeneity online is to defy the colonial project of elimination,” (Carlson & Frazer, 2020, p. 4). In that light, these groups are more than just collections of dinner inspiration or “food porn”; they capture a living, breathing form of cultural and political resistance.

### *Challenging the Monolithic Lens on Indigenous Culture*

The sheer diversity and vibrancy of kai within these online communities defy perceptions of kai Māori as static, absent beyond the marae or relegated to the past. Instead, the posts on these groups reveal a living, adaptive and imaginative culture – one that draws on intergenerational ancestral knowledge while actively responding to contemporary realities and cravings.

In my experience within the world of food writing, kai Māori is often reduced to solely encompassing a few canonical dishes like hāngī or boil-up. This narrow framing obscures the astonishing complexity of our cuisine and with that, contributes to a broader, monolithic understanding of who we are as a people. It erases the dynamism of our practices and reinforces the damaging myth that Indigenous cultures are unchanging relics of the distant past and that when we innovate, we somehow dilute our authenticity. That myth has political ramifications – underpinning racist assumptions and justifying systems of marginalisation.

Within the current political context, there is an urgent need to recognise the depth and nuances of all parts of our culture, including how we eat. To know that we are a people of hāngī and boil up, yes, but also of kūmara puddings, seaweed jellies, fermented shellfish and rēwena crumpets, is to know that we are an innovative and imaginative people.

These online spaces are proof that kai Māori remains a source of pride and excitement, despite persistent discourse that focuses on its absence. While it’s true that kai Māori is scarce within the restaurant scene or supermarket aisle, these communities show that its value does not depend on

commercial visibility. Our kai holds inherent meaning and mana within the everyday lives of our communities – as something both important and delicious, whether or not it appears on a menu.

### *The Importance of Facebook Groups for Understanding our Culinary Traditions*

The places our culinary traditions are being formed are expanding beyond kitchens, marae and cookbooks – they now include digital platforms like Facebook. As we navigate a world increasingly defined by climate change, threats to Indigenous sovereignty, species extinction, the profit-driven globalised food industry and the erosion of traditional knowledge, understanding where and how our food practices evolve is vital to protecting and adapting them with integrity, in ways which support the maintenance of whakapapa-based relationships with kai and collective aspirations.

In this context, Facebook groups have become key forums for collectively defining kai Māori and shaping our culinary future. Much like the Māori cookbooks of the 1980s – which played a role in codifying kai Māori and affirming Māori identity and mana – these online groups function as contemporary repositories of cultural knowledge and identity.

On this note, I have contemplated the usefulness of these groups, not only as sites for community dialogue around kai today, but as repositories of knowledge for future researchers, and generations of Māori. These online spaces are treasure troves of broad-ranging, everyday kai practices that are rarely documented in historical literature. Despite this potential, the archival potential of Facebook groups is greatly limited by the technical constraints of the platform's architecture. This study encountered numerous difficulties accessing historical data – even just a month's worth of postings were difficult to access. Facebook's search functionality is rudimentary, lacking the ability to sort by date, engagement or relevance. There is also no way to systematically download posts or comments, and there remains the persistent risk that Facebook, a platform we have little to no control over, could erase this data entirely.

While the content within these groups is rich and valuable, its use in Māori research presents ethical complexities. As this study has grappled with, there is a pressing need to develop research guidelines informed by MDSov principles. These guidelines could support more contextual, culturally grounded approaches to engaging with such data, ensuring that its use aligns with the values and expectations of communities.

Given these limitations, if we were to look into the future, we might begin to envision alternative platforms – designed by and for Māori – that enable us to share, celebrate and archive kai in ways that serve both present needs and future generations. These would be virtual communities grounded in whakapapa, sovereignty and the intentional preservation of our culinary traditions.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

This thesis has platformed two kai Māori Facebook groups as examples of how Māori culture and identity can continue and adapt in dynamic ways. The central theoretical contribution of this study lies in conceptualising these groups as virtual hākari – digital feasts that, while not providing physical nourishment, are rich in cultural sustenance. Maintained by digital ringawera who share images, recipes and stories to do with kai, these online gatherings reflect the relational, communal and ever-evolving nature of kai Māori. They mirror the regional nuances and diversity of Māori experience, while fostering unified conceptions of identity, belonging and solidarity. Rather than replacing traditional forms of gathering and sharing, these groups extend them – providing new forms of participation in an increasingly digital world.

Within the whakapapa-based framework of this study, I have sought to understand kai by way of the expansive and intricate ways it connects us, with each other and beyond. It is important to acknowledge that both in the past and in the present, kai and our relationships with it have been profoundly disrupted. So, to eat, cook, share and celebrate kai unapologetically, as is done daily within these groups, is a commitment to continuity, an affirmation of our futures. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012, p. 4) reminds us: “The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope”. Our plates, physical, or virtual can embody exactly that: resistance, hope and a living continuation of Māori ways of being.

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## Appendix 1:

Consent message for quoted posts

"Tēnā koe, My name's Charlotte Muru-Lanning and I'm a student at The University of Waikato. I am reaching out to ask for permission to reproduce your post from the [insert name of group] Facebook group, as part of my Master's thesis. My thesis is looking at how kai Māori traditions are continuing and evolving on social media and your post would be a valuable addition to this kaupapa. (I will link the exact post below.) This will remain anonymous and your name will not be used. However, there is a chance that your post might be traceable online. This research may be used in academic publications within journals, books, conference presentations, seminars and teaching. I am also happy to send you your post in its final form in the thesis for you to see how it will be used. You also have a right to decline this request. If you are willing to allow me to reproduce your words, please let me know. If you have any further questions, don't hesitate to ask. Thank you for your consideration and help. 😊 Ngā manaakitanga, Charlotte Muru-Lanning"

## Appendix 2:

### Ethics approval letter

*Te Wānanga o Ngā Kete | Division of Arts,  
Law, Psychology & Social Sciences*  
The University of Waikato  
Private Bag 3105  
Hamilton 3240  
New Zealand

Te Kura Whatu Oho Mauri  
School of Psychology  
Dr Oleg Medvedev  
Tel: +64 7 837 9212  
Email: [oleg.medvedev@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:oleg.medvedev@waikato.ac.nz)  
[www.waikato.ac.nz](http://www.waikato.ac.nz)



Charlotte Muru-Lanning  
[charlotte@metromagazine.co.nz](mailto:charlotte@metromagazine.co.nz)  
[cm742@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:cm742@students.waikato.ac.nz)

Professor Tahu Kukutai

Te Ngria

28 March 2024

Dear Charlotte

Re: **FS2024-12: Virtual hākari: Forging kai Māori communities on social media**

Thank you for submitting and ethics application to the ALPSS Human Research Ethics Committee. We have reviewed your application and the Committee is now pleased to offer formal approval for your research activities.

We encourage you to contact the committee should issues arise during your data collection, or should you wish to add further research activities or make changes to your project as it unfolds. We wish you all the best with your research. Thank-you for engaging with the process of Ethical Review.

Kind regards



Dr Oleg Medvedev, Convenor  
*Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences Human Research Ethics*